

**CULTURAL BIAS ON THE IELTS EXAMINATION: A CRITICAL  
REALIST INVESTIGATION**

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### **Dedication**

This work is dedicated first and foremost to my husband, Richard Walter, who has never stopped believing in me and who was the first to suggest I do my doctorate many years ago. I would also like to thank the one professor who saw in me the potential for academic studies long ago, my German literature professor Dr. Guenther Kocks.

Although I never had the chance to thank him for his inspiration and support while he was alive, I dedicate part of this work to him now - for without his influence, I may never have ventured this far. I would also like to thank my children, Nicolas and Leah, for their kind understanding of my many hours away from them to complete this project. Special thanks, of course, go out to Professor Chrissie Boughey without whom I never would have realized this dream.

### Abstract

The study reported in this thesis investigated Emirati students' claims related to experiences of cultural bias of the reading component of the IELTS examination through a critical realist lens. Critical realism posits a layered reality which allows for the conceptualization of experiences as emerging from the interplay of events and mechanisms found in two other realms of reality – the actual and the real. Experiences, therefore, have a different ontological status than the events and the causal mechanisms to which they are attributed. Social realism was used to further explore the depth of the realm of the real through Archer's construct of analytical dualism. This allowed for the placement of generative mechanisms into three domains: structure, culture, and agency.

There were two parts to this investigation: a content analysis and a focus group study. The first part of the content analysis consisted of analyzing 60 reading passages from 20 IELTS examinations for a number of cultural categories. These included such things as cultural objects, social roles, idiomatic expressions, traditions and festivals, superstitions and beliefs, and political and historical settings. The second part of the content analysis focused on the question types and syntactical structure of the 5 different IELTS examinations that the focus groups students sat. All three components of the analysis – the cultural content, question types, and syntactical structure – were conducted at the level of the actual. Findings indicated that on average, an IELTS examination contained 14 cultural references of various kinds. Only 4% of all geographical references pertained to the Middle East with the biggest share being western locations. The most common question types were *matching questions*, *fill in the blank questions*, and *yes/no*

*questions* with more than 50% of all questions requiring some form of higher order thinking due to text reinterpretation. The study also found that the question types were not consistently distributed over the examinations with each consisting of a different variety of questions and some even having repetitive question types on one reading examination.

The second part of the study was the focus groups. Here, 21 Emirati students sat 5 different IELTS examinations. Upon test completion, these students underwent a semi-structured interview to relate their experiences of the test. These experiences, at the level of the empirical, all shared 7 ideas: reading is hard, the questions are too difficult, the passages are too long and difficult, the topics are unfamiliar, the topics are not interesting, the vocabulary is too difficult, and there is not enough time. When the processes of retroduction and abduction were applied to both the content analysis and these common experiences, numerous structures and discourses at the level of the real were identified as having contributed to the emergence of the feeling of bias at the level of the empirical. These structures included such things as the students' school system (eg. curriculum, assessment, instructors etc.), religion, literacy practices, and home. In the cultural domain, a number of discourses were found to contribute to the experiences at the level of the empirical. Amongst these were the 'Unimportance of Reading', the culture of 'Obedience', the rejection of the 'un-Islamic', and the students' sense of 'Entitlement'.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Background to Study**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This first chapter will give the background to this study. It will begin with a brief description of the country in which the study is located, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), including its resources and culture before focusing on higher education in the UAE – in particular the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination and its role within the higher education system both in the UAE and at Khalifa University, the university at which the study was conducted. It will also outline the nature of the students involved in this study.

#### **1.2 The United Arab Emirates**

The small nation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), formerly known as the Trucial States, is located on the Arabian Peninsula in Western Asia on the Arabian Gulf. Neighbouring countries include Saudi Arabia to the south and Oman to the east (see Figure 1). The country consists of seven principalities or emirates, each ruled by its own monarchy but all part of a union with one ruling president as head of state. Of the seven emirates, Abu Dhabi is the largest, encompassing over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the land. It is also the capital of the UAE.

The population of the UAE is an estimated 5  $\frac{1}{2}$  million people (CIA World Factbook, 2013) of which approximately 20% are Emirati. The rest of the population consists of expatriates from countries all over the world with a large percentage from

Southeast Asia. The large expatriate community is mainly employed in sectors related to construction, hospitality, education, and health care - with the local population largely engaged in government administration: "... the UAE relies almost entirely on expatriate labor in all sectors of the economy, with the exception of government sector positions..." (Kirk, 2010, p. 11).



Source: <http://fanack.com/countries/uae>

*Figure 1: Location of the United Arab Emirates*

The UAE's main industry is petroleum - with major exports of crude oil and natural gas financing the country's rapid growth and development. Abu Dhabi's National Oil Company (ADNOC) reports the country has close to 10% of the world's oil reserves and is home to the 5th largest gas reserve in the world (Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, 2013).

The harsh desert climate, the infertile coastal plains, and lack of natural water inside the country severely limit the country's agricultural industry, allowing for less than

1.5% of the land used for agriculture (Shihab, 1997). Tourism, on the other hand, has become an increasingly lucrative industry, with Dubai having seen 9.3 million visitors come to its city alone in 2011 according to the *Gulf News* (2012, March 7).

Since the country's formation on December 2, 1971, it has made enormous advances in development. The country was ranked first in the region and 30<sup>th</sup> globally in the 2011 UN Human Development Index (Kannan, 2012). In its 2011 report, the UN cited the UAE as having very high human development, highlighting that in the past 30 years, the life expectancy of an Emirati had increased by 8.4 years and the number of years of education by 4.7 (Kannan, 2012). To date it has a literacy rate of 91% (Badry, 2012) with the country spending 1.2% of its GDP on education (CIA World Factbook, 2013).

The future development of the country is fuelled by the government's 2021 Vision which aims to elevate the UAE to one of the 'best' countries in the world (United Arab Emirates Government, 2010). The vision summary highlights the key elements of this initiative:

In a strong and safe union, knowledgeable and innovative Emiratis will confidently build a competitive and resilient economy. They will thrive as a cohesive society bonded to its identity and enjoy the highest standards of living within a nurturing and sustainable environment. (United Arab Emirates Government, 2010, p. 6)

In the country's aim to produce well-rounded, knowledgeable, and creative citizens, it plans to offer first rate education. This process is already underway through the efforts of the Abu Dhabi Educational Council (ADEC) which has begun the educational reform needed to transform the old traditional, rote-based learning system into a more progressive, dynamic one in the emirate of Abu Dhabi. One of the main educational goals is to foster critical thinking and practical skills in order to enable students to perform on par academically with the more advanced nations of the world. This is to include the achievement of high scores on standardized international tests (United Arab Emirates Government, 2010) – of which the IELTS is a part.

The goal of producing innovative and competent citizens places an enormous burden on national universities and colleges. In order to compete in a global environment with international counterparts, graduates of these higher educational institutions must possess a wide variety of new skills (Fox, 2007). The leaders of the nation expect an educated workforce with diverse skills to support the nation's growing economy- as their ten year plan for educational reform highlights (ECSSR, 2011).

**1.2.1 Current State of Education in the UAE** The UAE's school system consists primarily of public schools, with statistics indicating 61% of all schools as government run (Al-Qutami, 2011). The current state of the public education system is 'challenged' at best. The UAE Ministry of Education is currently reforming schools to create more effective learning environments, teaching methods, teacher education, curricula, and learning resources. It is also trying to engage students and parents more in

the educational process – an idea relatively new to the region – as well as implement new models of assessment (Al-Qutami, 2011).

Historically, the education system is rooted in religion. The religious teachings of the imams provided the education of the nation's young males in the early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on memorizing the Holy Quran and the Prophet's Hadiths (Al Farra, 2011). Islamic rituals, calligraphy, and writing were among the other subjects taught at the time. In the early 1950's, the philanthropic efforts of Egypt and Kuwait assisted with the development of the education system (Lootah, 2011). It was the curricula and the teachers from this part of the region that laid the foundation of the current educational system.

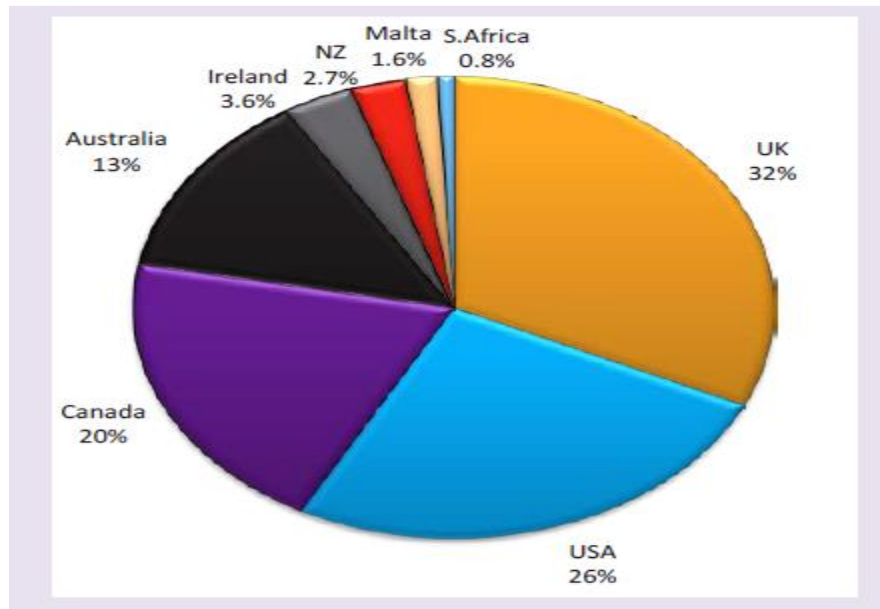
By 1971, when the UAE became a unified country, general education was still largely limited within the country prompting students seeking higher education to go abroad to complete their education (Al Farra, 2011). To put this into perspective, Al Farra cites that in 1962 there were only 20 schools with an enrollment of 4000 students nationwide. When the country became unified, the first order of the day was to provide free education for all citizens. The goal was to eradicate illiteracy fully by signing into law mandatory education for all. However, with “no indigenous educational system...the country began the process of buying in the skills needed to build local educational capacity...” (Kirk, 2010, p. 15) ultimately deciding to use an Egyptian model. This choice is evidenced by the curricula and the number of Egyptian teachers and staff found in the public school system in the UAE (Kirk, 2010).

In the past decade, however, (with a call from the leaders of the country to create a high-quality education system) the education sector has undergone a number of changes - one of which is the use of English as the medium of instruction at government universities. This shift is part of the leaders' vision of making the UAE a global player - both economically and politically. In order to compete globally, the leaders require the citizens of the UAE to function in English – the current lingua franca of the business, education, research, and technology worlds (Crystal, 2003). This is thanks to the steady promotion of the English language by cultural and political forces which date back to colonial times (Phillipson, 2003). Although the ruling class firmly believes in the promotion of the English language to allow for the country's global participation, not everyone is fully convinced. In my experience, the move to promote English has brought about some unhappiness in the ranks – particularly in those citizens who do not appreciate, understand, or are critical of the concept of globalization and fear a loss of social identity as a result.

This concept of communicating in the language of trade, however, is not new to the world with English having gained dominance only after a long line of other languages had come and gone (ie Latin, Greek). In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Britain led the way through its colonization of the world, and the use of English began to spread. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was Britain once again who led the world through an industrial revolution – further promoting the use of English (Crystal, 2003). When the late 19<sup>th</sup> century came around, the USA had become the new economic power house – still an English speaking country. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, English had become embedded

in so many industries that it affected many – if not all – aspects of society. It permeated the press industry, the film industry, the music industry, the research industry, the transportation industry, the tourist industry, the communication industry, the technology industry, and of course – the education industry, to name but a few (Crystal, 2003).

With the process of globalization came the desire to learn the English language. With much of the world's knowledge now encoded in one linguistic form, this development should come as no surprise. As a result, English has become a commodity to be bought and sold on the world market with the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry growing exponentially worldwide (Crystal, 2003). Out of the growth of English language learning arose the need for English language assessment – hence the emergence of various examinations like the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing Service (IELTS) examination – which is the focus of this study. The ELT industry of teaching and assessment has now become a multi-million dollar industry worldwide with English Australia (2012) claiming it reached over US \$11.6 billion in 2011 alone with the language travel market divided up into four major destinations. The figure on the next page highlights the distribution of the annual revenue of this industry.



Source: English Australia, 2012

*Figure 2: Market share of global language travel in 2011*

With the promotion of the English language, however, comes the promotion of its value system and way of life as well, since language and culture are closely linked. Street (1984), whose work will be drawn on heavily in this study, contends that the use of language is a social act, steeped in culture. Canagarajah (2003) believes that English language teaching itself is built on philosophies and pedagogical traditions dating back to the colonial times resulting in the promotion of - what Phillipson (2003) terms - linguistic imperialism. Pennycook (1994) concurs with this and sees educational institutions and organizations such as the ones responsible for the IELTS examination in the same light since it is an integral part of an economic, political, intellectual, and social international movement in a drive for global dominance. The promotion of English is therefore not a

neutral act and translates into the promotion of western culture and social identity as a result.

Despite the danger of altering the country's social identity, the leaders of the UAE are determined to press forward in their educational reforms at all levels – primary, secondary, and post-secondary. These high level efforts, however, have not worked as well as expected since the school system continues to be plagued with a number of challenges (Ridge, 2011). Badry (2012) concurs with Ridge and points out that although the “educational strategies have succeeded in achieving one of the highest rates of literacy (91%) in the Arab world, official assessments show the educational system is falling short...” (p. 92). Currently, the public education system faces the following challenges: a high dropout rate for young males, outdated teaching methods by under-qualified teachers resistant to change, curricula emphasizing rote-learning, assessment mainly in the form of standardized testing, lack of professional development for teachers, and insufficient learning resources. One important element to note here relates to the curriculum used in the public education system. With a continued focus on mathematics, science, Arabic, and Islamic studies, students are faced with a very limited curriculum – one that does not promote creativity, critical thinking, or even subject-matter choice (Ridge, 2011). Currently, the curriculum does not promote risk-taking and innovation – characteristics the government says it wants to see in its citizens by 2021. Al Amiri (2012) confirms Ridge's claims, quoting low achievement in local students in such key areas as critical thinking and problem solving – much needed skills for “analysis, evaluation, comparison, and conclusion” (p. 53). The lack of these skills is largely due to

the curricula and the assessment system which “aims to mainly measure the student’s ability to memorize rather than assessing the educational progress” (Al Amiri, p. 27).

Attempts are being made to address these weaknesses in the education system with the UAE “engaged in an educational paradigm shift as it comes to terms with the limitations of traditional perspectives on teaching, learning, and schooling...” (Dada, 2012, p. 109). An effort is being made to abandon past practices in favour of student-centred experiences that promote inquiry and problem-solving. This change, although not painless, can only be achieved with the steadfast commitment of all stakeholders in education, ranging from the highest government offices to the teachers, students, and families. Arguably this process will only be achieved if profound changes in the educational ‘cultural system’ also take place.

**1.2.2 UAE Culture** The UAE has a rich cultural heritage rooted in the country’s environment. The harsh and varied terrain of the country has molded the traditions and lifestyles of the people. Paramount to their survival has always been the age-old tribal social structure which obligates each family to do what is best for the entire tribe – a societal structure common to the Arab world (Hofstede, 1997). Halbouni (2009) confirms these high collectivist values of the UAE in a study which measured both individualistic and collectivistic perspectives. Mutual assistance and altruistic hospitality was the foundation of their survival while Islam functioned as the glue that held the society together (UAE Interact, 2011). These tenets still hold true today and continue to shape the younger generation with one significant difference– the wealth of the local population. In the past, the Bedouin wandered from place to place in a bid to survive the harsh

conditions of the land. Coastal communities depended on fishing and pearl diving for subsistence. Poverty and hardship were everywhere. Nowadays, the average adult Emirati is worth 150,000 US dollars – three times the amount ten years ago (Hunter, 2010) with Abu Dhabi citizens' individual worth at a staggering \$17 million dollars according to *ABC Good Morning America* (2007, October 22). It was the discovery of oil that brought about the rapid changes and growth in the UAE:

The UAE, traditionally dependent on fishing, pearl diving, trading and rural wadi agriculture, was transformed from a sleepy desert backwater to a complex, modern, consumer economy supported by a developed infrastructure and modern communications system. (Kirk, 2010, pp. 9-10)

The sudden increase in wealth has brought with it a modern lifestyle which has little to no resemblance to the nomadic existence of the region's forefathers. Nevertheless, efforts are being made to conserve the culture, architecture, and authentic sports of the past. The skills once used in desert life continue to be held in high esteem even if they are not in use today. Islam continues to guide major life decisions and generosity and respect for elders are virtues upheld to this day, even among today's affluent youth. Kirk (2010, p. 9) confirms the widespread influence of Islam as well, stating "the scope and influence of religion underpins all aspects of society in the UAE, with social policy based on religious doctrine".

Although no studies, to my knowledge, have been conducted in the UAE with regards to the effect of *wealth* on student motivation, personal experience with local

students over the past decade indicate their wealth to be an unhelpful influence in this regard. Many students come to campus with their attention focused on their new luxury cars, watches, mobile phones, and other various gadgets rather than on their education and personal development. There are daily reminders of this sentiment in the classroom where students whose phones are confiscated for inappropriate in-class use simply retrieve yet another mobile phone upon confiscation.

Some students openly speak of their wealth and ‘wasta’ – a term given to denote powerful connections or influence in society – and feel it will get them the power needed to gain employment at the end of their studies. This belief is substantiated by a comparative study done on Emirati youth and non-Emirati youth which showed that the Emirati youth did not believe that their hard work and efforts would eventually lead to success, citing connections and luck as an overriding factor instead (Jones, 2011). This belief translates into little to no motivation to learn in the classroom. For the less affluent students, there appears to be very little incentive to learn as well – since learning for the ‘sake of survival’ is almost non-existent due to the social and family safety nets in place within the country. Personal experience has shown, however, that students from the poorer regions of the UAE tend to work harder and take their studies more seriously.

Unfortunately with no personal money spent on their own learning, few students recognize the value of the educational opportunities given to them by their government. In fact, not only do Khalifa University students *not* pay for their education or housing, they also receive a monthly stipend for attending the university. The only part of their education not paid for by the government is their repeated attempts at gaining the IELTS

entrance requirement, with some students sitting the examination at their own expense up to 15 times. This leads directly into the next section – the IELTS examination and its role in higher education in the UAE.

### **1.3 The IELTS Examination**

The first recorded ‘language testing’ event is most likely found in the bible when the Gileads used the pronunciation of the word ‘Shibboleth’ to determine between foe and friend, resulting in the slaughter of thousands (Kluitmann, 2008). The history of modern language testing, however, can be traced back to more recent times with the advent of two specific tests in the 1940s: the Test of Aural Comprehension in 1947 and the Measurement in English as a Foreign Language in 1949 (Kluitmann, 2008).

Proficiency tests like the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) did not emerge until somewhat later - with the first ever TOEFL test administered in 1964. The original examination tested discrete components of language skills with the exception of writing and speaking. This test has now evolved into a much more comprehensive examination administered by ETS (Educational Testing Service). TOEFL was the market leader in proficiency testing for many years until the IELTS examination was created over 20 years ago. This coincided with a shift in language testing from a grammar focus to more of a communicative focus.

The IELTS examination is an internationally recognized standardized test that measures language proficiency – much like the TOEFL but different in a couple of ways. For one, it was the first of the two examinations to measure speaking ability. There are

also notable differences in the two examinations with regard to purpose. The TOEFL is meant to assess language ability for the purpose of entering a programme of study in North America. The IELTS is more diverse and has one version dedicated to the assessment of academic English and another for general proficiency for other purposes.

Whereas TOEFL used to be the market leader, many universities and colleges around the world now choose to use the academic version of the IELTS test to assess the language abilities of prospective students - and the UAE is no exception. To get an understanding of how widespread this examination is, we need only to look at the number of tests taken worldwide in 2012 alone – a staggering 2 million (IELTS Organisation, 2013). The predominant use of the IELTS examination for entrance into university and college programmes in the UAE makes this a high stakes examination for students in the country. The examination is used in over 130 countries and in over 8000 institutions/organizations worldwide.

As already mentioned, there are two different versions of the examination – general and academic. Students wishing to study at government institutions in the UAE need to sit the academic version in order to apply for programmes. Although different universities and different programmes in the UAE have varying minimal bands for acceptance, the average band needed is a 5 which translates into the ability of a modest user.

To clarify, there is no pass or fail in IELTS. Students receive a band score from 0 to 9 with the latter representing the features of an expert user of the English language. In the UAE, the average university or college acceptance band is that of a modest user (band

5) which signals the candidate has restricted command of the English language but can handle basic communication. Khalifa University, where this study takes place, insists on the higher band level of 6. This refers to an English speaker who is classified as a competent user, one who has an understanding of fairly complex language but can still make many mistakes (IELTS Band Scores, 2013). On average, a student sitting the academic version of the examination in 2011 scored an overall band of 5 in the United Arab Emirates (Test-takers Performance, 2011). Compared to most countries in the West, this is a relatively low band score. Germans, for example, scored an overall band of 6.8 as did the French, with the Italians coming in at 6.2. Saudi Arabia, the only other listed Gulf country on the IELTS chart, was similar to the UAE, sitting at 4.5. Interestingly, out of the 40 language speakers listed, the Arabic speakers were the lowest performers on the list with an overall band of 5.2.

The overall band score is a combination of four scores: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each section is administered in one sitting but separately from one another – with the exception of the speaking component. The speaking examination is administered either later the same day or on the day before or after the written component of the examination.

This study focuses on the reading component of the examination only. Each test has three reading passages ranging from 750 to 1000 words per passage with a total of 40 questions. Candidates have 60 minutes to complete the reading part. Texts are from a variety of sources - books, journals, magazines, newspapers- and are written in a variety of styles (University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2013) but are academic in

nature as far as topics are concerned. Question types range from multiple choice and sentence or table completion to matching, short answer, and diagram labeling.

The test production process is complex in nature and draws on a network of over 115 item writers (Green & Hawkey, 2012). First the item writers are asked to find appropriate texts from a variety of sources around the world. The writers have the freedom to adapt the originals to better suit the needs of the test. Once selected and/or adapted, the text is submitted for review to a team of editors which consists of the chairs of the item test writer teams and representatives of the Cambridge ESOL. Material is carefully examined in this meeting and sent back with feedback. The item writer then prepares a new version, based on the feedback, along with questions for the text and resubmits it to another committee. If the edited material meets with the approval of the committee, it is forwarded to a test bank for the pre-testing process. These pre-tests take place at selected IELTS test centres and are conducted on groups of students. Data is collected from this pre-test and analyzed by another committee which determines if the item moves forward to be included in the test construction or if it is rejected.

#### **1.4 The University**

There are a variety of universities in the UAE with three federally funded institutions nationwide and seventy-five privately licensed institutes offering a diverse selection of programmes (UAE Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2012). This study takes place at Khalifa University of Science, Technology, and Research (KU) in Abu Dhabi – a relatively new institution which came into being from the

visionary leadership of Abu Dhabi's ruling family. It is an independent, non-profit institution and the first of its kind to focus solely on engineering in the UAE. Its mission is to advance learning through teaching and research while at the same time dedicating time and effort to the discovery and application of knowledge (Khalifa University of Science, Technology, and Research, 2013). KU has a wide selection of engineering departments from which to choose: Aerospace Engineering, Biomedical Engineering, Civil Infrastructure and Environmental Engineering, Nuclear Engineering, Electrical and Computer Engineering, Industrial and Systems Engineering, and Mechanical Engineering.

To be accepted into an undergraduate degree programme in one of the above-mentioned departments, students must receive an overall band of 6 on the IELTS, have excellent high school grades in mathematics and sciences, do well on an in-house mathematics test, and pass a personal interview. Only few students who apply manage to gain direct entry by satisfying all these conditions. The majority of applicants are weak in English and/or mathematics, physics, and information technology and find themselves placed into a bridging programme. This is not unusual as statistics from the Ministry of Education indicate 94% of all tertiary students have to first improve their levels of science, mathematics, and English in foundation programmes before moving on to faculty courses (Knowledge and Human Development Authority, 2012). According to Ridge (2011), the blame for this can be laid directly at the door of the public secondary school system which, with its earlier listed weaknesses, makes the secondary education

incompatible with the requirements of higher educational institutions in the country. As I will argue later, however, more than the performance of the education system is involved.

There are two levels of English, mathematics, and physics in this preparatory programme at KU – level 001 and 002. Level 002 is designed for students who are close to achieving the entrance requirements and need a little extra instruction. 001 is for those students with the desire and the academic potential to achieve the entrance requirements. After successful completion of 001, students move on to do a semester of 002 as well. In order to gain entry into one of the engineering department programmes, students must pass all their preparatory courses and obtain a band 6 in the academic version of the IELTS. This entry requirement for undergraduate studies is the most stringent of the government institutions in the UAE. Those students that manage to achieve the entry requirements then face their next hurdle – the academic rigour needed to be successful in the faculty classes. As a result, KU has established itself as a leading institution in both the UAE and the region, with very few institutions rivaling its high academic standards.

### **1.5 The University Preparatory Student**

The average student in the preparatory programme at KU is eighteen or nineteen years old and graduated with high marks from a local government school. These high marks are often inflated and do not fully reflect the competencies of the students, making the first semester at university unexpectedly difficult for some, if not most, students. Students readily admit this and state that grades are measured on one's ability to

memorize in high school and that learning was generally passive in nature (Burt, 2004).

This claim is substantiated by Ridge:

... the UAE has a highly standardized national curriculum... with a system of examinations (that) tests very particular information that students are supposed to have memorized for the exams...(with) the content drawn completely and often verbatim from the official textbooks... (2011, pp. 70-71)

One of the main observations personally made in the classroom is the students' lack of reading experiences (with the exception of the Holy Quran). Students, having grown up in a largely oral culture (Swan & Ahmed, 2011), find little value or pleasure in reading. Motivation to read, linked primarily to intrinsic motivation (Alsheikh & Elhoweris, 2011), is generally low in UAE classrooms although there is a desire for students to distinguish themselves in the eyes of their peers and family which may serve as a motivating factor (Burt, 2004). Lack of reading is said to be a result of little-to-no reading material at home and a lack of literary tradition (Swan & Ahmed, 2011). This appears to be prevalent throughout the region and not specific to the UAE. A 2008 UN survey confirmed the average person in the Middle East reads about 4 pages a year in comparison to his/her western counterpart who reads on average anywhere from 8 to 11 books annually although this statistic is currently being questioned (Swan & Ahmed, 2011).

To exacerbate the lack of reading culture, experience has shown that students bring very little world knowledge (ie. knowledge from outside their region) to the reading

process itself. This lack of general knowledge can manifest itself in different ways in the classroom. For example, in the writing of an IELTS essay, a student supported his/her thesis statement on the disparity between the poor and the wealthy with a declaration that George Bush married Princess Diana and that they now have three wealthy children. In a speaking debate, students argued that non-Muslim women (ie. women from outside their country) should not marry local men for they carry diseases. In reading classes, students were unaware of major international landmarks, historical events, and famous people such as John F. Kennedy.

On the other hand, the students' strong oral culture can be credited with creating willing and eager classroom communicators. Out of all the skills, the students' speaking skills tend to be the best, giving the students much needed confidence in the classroom.

To sum up, the average student in our preparatory programme is young and inexperienced, lacks reading skills, reading experience, and world knowledge, is highly social and has an overly-inflated view of his/her academic abilities. Moreover, the high school system from which the students have come has not prepared them for the critical thought and work ethic needed to succeed at university (Ridge, 2011). The high school curricula itself (not to mention the teachers) is lacking in the ability to develop flexible and innovative thinkers. In terms of English proficiency, most students come in with an IELTS band of 5 to KU with speaking being their greatest strength.

Personal experience with students in various English classes over the years has highlighted a concern with regards to the cultural bias found in the topics of the IELTS examination. Students repeatedly claimed they knew very little about the topics

themselves, something which they felt adversely affected their performance. Cambridge IELTS, however, insists the examination is culturally neutral (Test-takers Information, 2013) and fair and unbiased (Researchers, 2013). This is because the process of writing test items is taken very seriously by IELTS. The creation of the examination is intensive and follows a systematic process called the Question Paper Production Process (Green & Hawkey, 2012). The first three stages consist of gathering and choosing various texts that suit the academic nature of the examination. Once the best material has been chosen, it is administered to a representative group of language learners for feedback. This feedback is then used for further development of the text. Despite this supposed foolproof method of text production, however, students in the UAE still contend there are cultural concerns with the reading examination.

Since the IELTS examination is the main benchmark used at UAE universities for entrance into higher academic studies, it determines the fate and possible future success of many, if not all, students in the country. It is vital, therefore, that the perceived cultural bias students talk of is further investigated – not only for the sake of the students taking the examination but also for the validity of the examination itself. The hope is that this study will add to other work undertaken on cultural bias and, eventually, prompt interrogation of the assumptions underpinning the content of the IELTS examination in order to make it fairer to all cultural groups taking the test.

This study will be conducted under a critical realist lens where reality is defined as layered and relative although the existence of relatively enduring mechanisms and structures from which experiences and observations about the world emerge is also

acknowledged (Bhaskar, 1989). Following Bhaskar (*ibid*), as I will explain in Chapter 3 of this thesis, any knowledge gleaned from this study will be understood as fallible and socially and historically situated – eliminating from the outset any statements of absolute truth. The knowledge reaped from this study will serve to further understand the phenomenon at hand and add to any existing literature.

Knowledge will be gained via a two-fold process in this study: one by a content analysis of reading passages on the IELTS examination in terms of cultural content, question types and syntactic structure, and secondly, by an in-depth look at students' experiences of bias via focus groups. The theoretical framework and methodology used will be explained in the forthcoming chapters and will be based on critical and social realism.

## **1.6 The Research Question**

As already indicated earlier in this chapter, students at KU often complain that the reading section of the IELTS examination is culturally biased. This study will aim to investigate how a particular cultural group experiences 'culture' when sitting the reading part of the IELTS test and will investigate the reasons for these experiences via a critical realist perspective.

**1.6.1 Main Question** How can the IELTS examination lead to experiences of cultural bias on the part of Emirati students?

**1.6.2 Subquestions** What are Emirati students' experience of cultural bias? What are the conditions from which these experiences emerge?

In order to answer these questions, the thesis takes the following form. Chapter 2 presents a literature review related to the investigation while Chapter 3 outlines critical realism and social realism, the theoretical framework used in this investigation. Chapter 4 lays out the research design. Chapters 5 and 6 present and discuss the findings in detail. Chapter 7 completes the thesis with its conclusions.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### 2.1 Introduction

Since no work is done in a vacuum, a review of existing literature fields on which my study focuses is necessary so we can place this research project in its rightful context. This chapter will begin with a brief history of reading and then explore significant research and topics related to the nature of reading. The impact of culture on adult reading performance (with a special focus on the role of topic familiarity) will then be addressed in greater detail.

#### 2.2 The Nature of Reading

**2.2.1. Introduction** Before a closer look is taken at the nature of reading, it is important to distinguish between reading theory and literacy theory. The reading theories outlined in this chapter link to *one* type of literacy perspective only – that of the traditional view of literacy. Street (1993) terms this view the ‘autonomous model’. This perspective of reading and writing sees literacy as a single phenomenon where one is either literate or not. This literacy equates to an acquisition of a set of skills obtained through formal education. It does not take into account other forms of literacy found in differing social contexts – for example, symbols spray painted on concrete walls, the recognition of the shapes of street signs, or communal literacy (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996).

Street’s Ideological Model of Literacy challenges this traditional, and arguably ‘commonsense’, view of literacy. Literacy is now expanded from the technical

interpretation to encompass reading and writing as a set of social practices. The view of literacy is now dependent on social context rather than solely on a set of skills resulting from formal schooling. In this perspective, literacy is relative, negotiable, and local. The focus is on the use of literacy and the different ways in which it appears in social contexts. Gee (1990, 2001) expands the concept of literacy even further to include Discourse – the knowledge of how to act, speak, think, and feel in a given social situation; in essence, he defines it as a way of being.

The reading history and theories reviewed in this chapter reflect the perspective of the dominant model of literacy, where reading is seen as a set of skills learned in formal education. This view spread and solidified itself with the invention of the printing press (Olson, 1977). Consequently this perspective does not recognize nor address the various ways in which people ‘read their world’ before the advent of the writing system. Olson (1977) warns against making the assumption that the absence of a writing system equates to the absence of a complex form of literature. It is important to note here that the history of reading might read differently if written from the perspective of Street’s notion of literacy as a social practice. This historical account has not received much attention except perhaps from Olson (1977), and so I have chosen to review the history of reading and the various theories on reading from the perspective of the technical side of literacy only.

**2.2.2. Reading Theories** The numerous theories available on reading make an exhaustive overview impractical for this study thereby prompting me to take a more

relevant, selective approach to the review which begins with a definition of reading and its history.

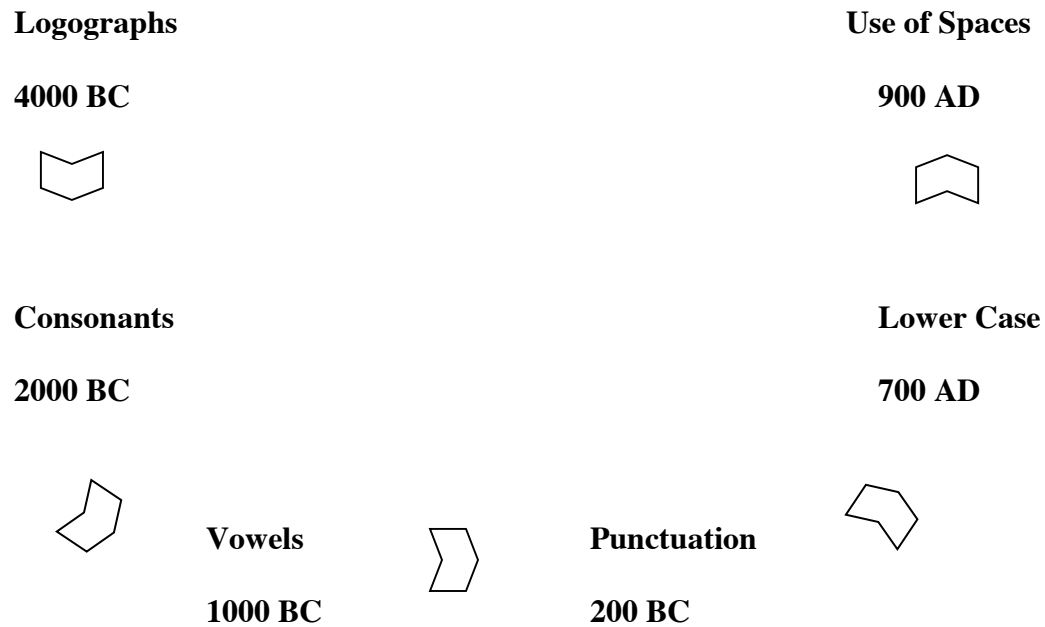
To begin with, ‘to read’ stems from the Sumerians and refers to a number of things: to count, to calculate, to consider, to memorize, to recite, to read aloud (Fischer, 2003). Unfortunately, in the field of reading much remains uncertain. As a subject, it is still in its infancy with significant division among academia over even the most basic elements such as its history and purpose (Johns, 2010). Reading is believed to have cultural, political, and intellectual roots reaching as far back as 4000 B.C. when writing was invented. But even the notion of writing preceding reading – which to some degree appears logical – is open to debate (Manguel, 1996). Nonetheless, an attempt at a definition and history will be made here with an understanding that a consensus has yet to be reached.

The definition of the act of reading has changed over the past thousand years. What was initially seen as the laborious task of deciphering visual information to retrieve meaning is now seen as much more complex. One such multifaceted interpretation of reading today, for example, is the metacognitive view. This sees the reader as a strategist that does numerous tasks throughout the reading process (Klein, Peterson, & Simington, 1991). These include functions such as identifying the purpose and text type, selecting appropriate reading strategies, and making predictions. This complex view of reading requires a whole set of skills on the part of the reader, ranging from the ability to classify, hypothesize, infer, and summarize to the ability to establish links between textual parts.

In the future, the definition of reading is certain to continue to expand, especially with the growth of electronic text and worldwide literacy rates (Fischer, 2003).

Historically speaking, the sight sound correlation– which is crucial to alphabetic literacies – originated in Mesopotamia. The notion then spread to surrounding areas like the Nile, Iran, and then as far away as the Indus Valley soon after. People began to realize the written word was much more competent in recording dates, names, numbers, and places than the human mind (Fisher, 2003). Stories, on the other hand, were easily held and retold orally (Olson, 1977). The diverse social worlds and languages that came in contact with this new invention of elementary reading long ago, however, influenced the graphic expressions created. This translated into the creation of many different expressions, not only one. This review – in light of the context of this study – will focus on only one: the western alphabet.

The Phoenicians invented the western alphabet around 2000 BC (Fisher, 2003). At that time, only the consonants existed. A thousand years later, this rudimentary alphabet experienced a tremendous shift – the addition of vowels. This laid the basic foundation of the alphabet used in the West today. The next major advancement did not occur until another 800 years later when the use of punctuation came into play. Finally, lower case characters were invented in 700 AD followed by – albeit 200 years later – the insertion of spaces, allowing the reader, for the first time, to read silently. The flow chart on the following page was created for the purpose of this study and illustrates this developmental process clearly.



*Figure 3: Historical development of the Western alphabet*

Although the notion may be difficult to substantiate, it is believed that reading focused on the simple act of decoding (ie. trying to get to the end product) in the early years: “Initially, it was the simple faculty of extracting visual information from an encoded system...” (Fisher, 2003, p. 1). At some point in time, however, there was a shift from product to process – a distinction often referred to today. According to Alderson (2000), process refers to the interaction between the reader and the text. Product, on the other hand, is the result of this process which equates to the understanding that is gained from the interaction itself.

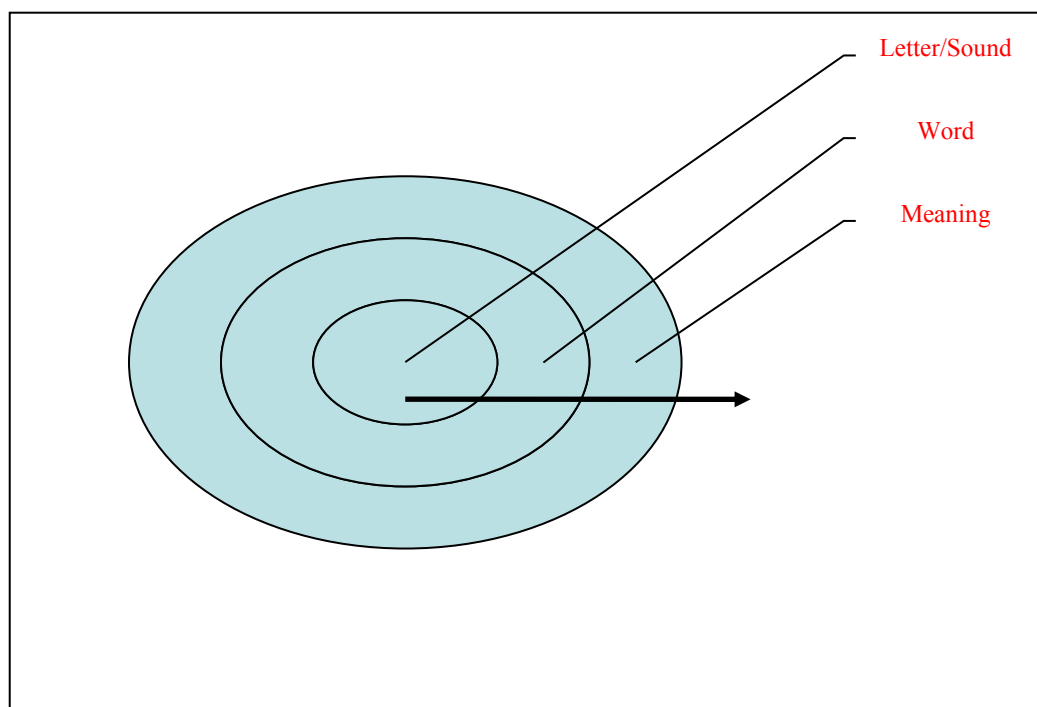
According to Alderson (2000), there are three general levels of understanding taking place when one is reading. The lowest level of understanding is literal. This refers

to the meaning derived from the letters on the page that make words, with words making sentences and so on. This level of meaning is vastly different from the secondary type: inferential. Inferential understanding comes from ‘reading between the lines’ and glean meaning from things not explicitly stated in the text. The third level of understanding, and the highest cognitive wise, is that of being able to go beyond the text to make critical evaluations.

Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) take a slightly different approach to defining the process of reading. They divide the practice of reading up into two categories: micro-processes and macro-processes. The micro-processes of reading generate the first level of understanding – the literal. It refers to the parsing of sentences and words and the examining of texts at face value. It was this level of understanding that the early readers focused on. It was not for pleasure; it was regarded as work. Macro-processing, in contrast, are those processes a reader activates that allow for a deeper and a more global understanding to occur. These processes were mentioned earlier in the metacognitive view of reading and include such higher order thinking skills as hypothesizing and inferencing.

But even these two basic distinctions of processing imply significant dispute. The current controversy in the theory of reading questions whether micro-processing is even possible at all. The argument exists that perhaps reading is essentially one global act of interaction with the text, a so-called unitary skill (Alderson, 2000), rather than a combination of separate skills (Lunzer & Gardner, 1979).

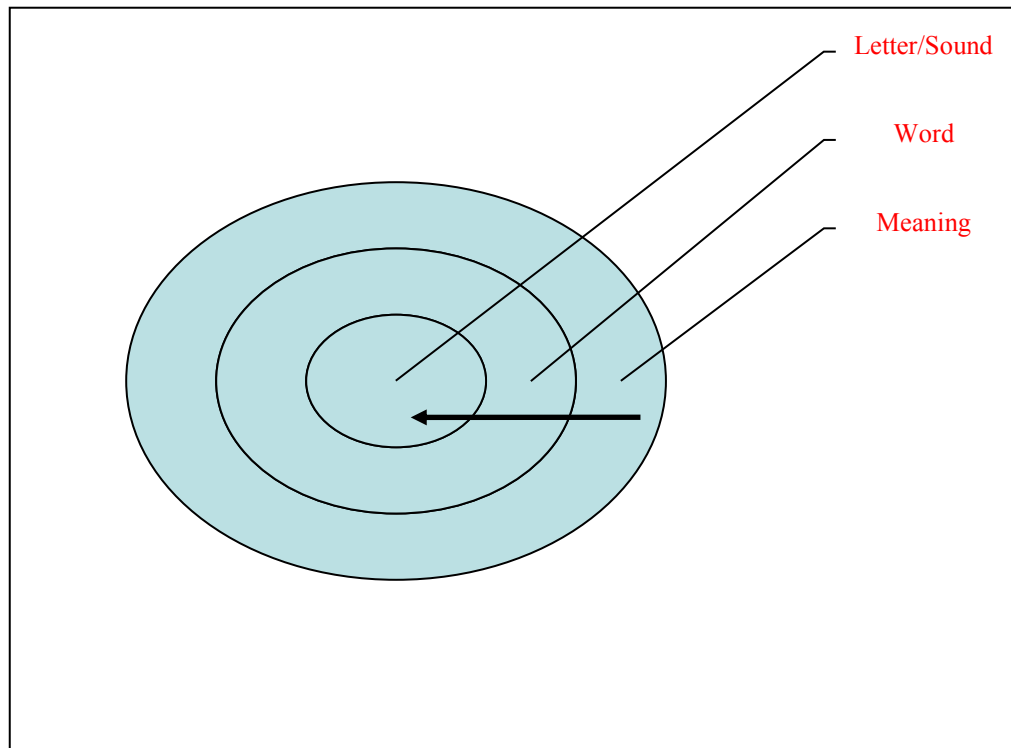
Overall, however, the main view of reading continues to consist of two parts: the act of decoding and the act of comprehension (Alderson, 2000). Reading is no longer viewed as a simple bottom-up procedure which requires only a given skill set to decode the message, something reflected in Gough's model of reading (1972). In this model, reading follows a given sequence of events – letter and sound to word and then to meaning. The following figure (designed for this study) summarizes the basics of this model:



*Figure 4: Model of bottom-up processing*

This contrasts with the top-down process where one gleans meaning by looking at the text holistically, drawing from one's experience - an idea first put forward by Goodman (1971). Goodman believed the act of reading was essentially a psycholinguistic

guessing game where a reader constructed hypotheses and tested them throughout the reading act trying to “reconstruct, as best he can, the message which has been encoded by writer as a graphic display” (Goodman, 1971, p. 135). This model can be summarized visually as the opposite of the bottom-up process:



*Figure 5: Model of top-down processing*

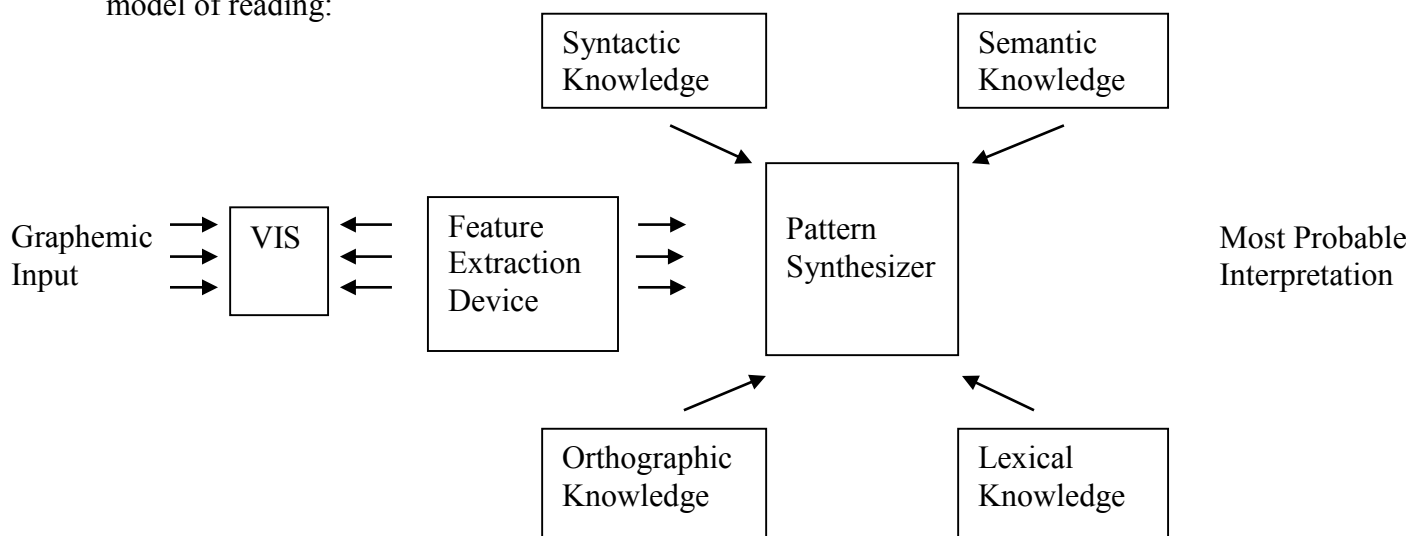
Others see reading as a combination of these two practices, a so-called interactive process (Day & Park, 2005). This philosophy stems from Rumelhart’s (1977) interactive model which views reading as the interaction of text and reader – especially the reader’s background knowledge.

Some of this interactive process is considered to be automatic (like the deciphering of a letter) while other parts of the process clearly require conscious

execution, like the evaluation of an article. However, the number of skills and strategies related to reading varies considerably (Alderson, 2000). Some are more related to product than process and vice versa but all-in-all the number of testable reading skills and abilities can reach close to one hundred:

(Lennon) looks back over half a century of published output on reading, including countless tests, and says that if the labels of tests are to be believed, then we can test some seventy to eighty reading skills and abilities. (Alderson, 2000, p. 94)

This complexity of what constitutes reading is reflected in Rumelhart's (1977) interactive model of reading:



*Figure 6: Interactive model of reading*

Nuttall (1996) uses an analogy to help us understand the reading process by likening it to the act of assembling a table. At the start, you have various different pieces with nuts and bolt and at the end of the task, the item is correctly assembled if all goes

well. All too often, however, there is a bolt or two inexplicably left over. Dumbfounded one wonders where the missing parts were supposed to go. The item is, nonetheless, assembled – perhaps not as intended by the producer but to the best of the ability by the interpreter. The task of assembling the item requires a variety of existing abilities such as the recognition of parts and their functions as well as special skills like putting things together. These skills could be likened to the skills and strategies used in the reading process. Most importantly, assembling an item also requires the knowledge of what the item is and its overall purpose in order for the task to be completed successfully. This refers to the notion and importance of background knowledge in reading – the main focal point of this research study.

Background knowledge is an umbrella term which subsumes various kinds of knowledge such as topic knowledge, text and linguistic knowledge, and cultural knowledge. Brown (1994) defines background knowledge as that which a reader brings to the task at hand. This not only consists of information on the topic but also a reader's experiences with the topic and his/her feelings towards it. Alderson defines background knowledge as knowledge related to how the world works and states that “all language processing requires world knowledge” (2000, p. 45). Marzano divides background knowledge up into two forms: academic and non-academic and argues that the former is important for academic success. According to Marzano, this type of background knowledge is acquired in two ways: through the “ability to process and store information” and through “the number and frequency of our academically oriented

experiences.” (2004, p. 4). Marzano contends that the more we already know about a topic, the more we are able to learn.

Models of reading that place importance on background knowledge above all else are referred to as ‘schema theory’ (Rumelhart, 1980). Schema theory refers to a reader’s activation of stored networks of information in the brain to which the reader links and integrates the incoming knowledge (Alderson, 2000). In order to understand a text, in other words, one must be able to link the information to our already existing knowledge base. Rumelhart (1980) refers to schema as the building blocks of cognition for they are used to process new and varied stimuli. Vacca and Vacca believe schemata “reflect the experiences, conceptual understanding, attitudes, values, skills, and strategies...(we) bring to a text situation.” (1999, p. 15)

Studies done by Carrell (1987), Chen and Donin (1997), and Hudson (1982) all show empirical support for the importance of a reader’s prior knowledge (available in the form of cognitive schemata) of the topic in second language reading comprehension (Pulido, 2004). Carrell (1983) distinguishes between two kinds of schemata needed for reading – content schemata and formal schemata. Content schemata pertain to the knowledge brought to the reading process by the reader in relation to the content of the text. Formal schemata refer to a reader’s internal network of linguistic knowledge – that is knowledge of and about the language:

One type of schema, or background knowledge, a reader brings to a text is a content schema, which is knowledge relative to the content domain of the text.

Another type is a formal schema, or knowledge relative to the formal, rhetorical organizational structures of different types of texts. (Carrell, 1987, p. 461)

Formal schemata also refer to a reader's knowledge on text construction or organization and text purposes. This is referred to as genre. Recently, the construct of genre (see for example Swales, 1981, 1985) has been used to explore the way knowledge on how texts are conventionally organised affects reading. Genre is defined as “a recognisable communicative event characterised by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs” (Bhatia, 1993, p. 13). In Australia, genre is taught explicitly at primary school level in an attempt to allow learners from all social backgrounds to access text types sanctioned by prestigious social groups (Christie, 1999a). Christie (1999b) notes that choices with respect to genre draw on what Systemic Functional Linguists, who draw on the work of Michael Halliday (see for example 1978, 1994), term the ‘context of culture’, a term first coined by anthropologist Malinowski in 1935.

According to Steffenson and Joag-Dev (1984), a reader's background knowledge is heavily influenced by his/her culture. This is confirmed by other research done on the role of cultural familiarity in the reading process (see Chandler, Poling, Ono, & Mustapha 1989; Dolan 1994; Freebody 1983; Hirsch 2003; Tierney 1983; Winograd & Newell 1985). From a perspective in schema theory, texts which draw on content schemata which are only available to some sets of readers can be said to be culturally biased.

Steffenson and Joag-Dev's (1984) study, for example, asked research participants from India and the United States to read letters written about weddings in both India and the States. Participants i) read the passage about the wedding related to their own cultural background more quickly, ii) recalled a greater amount of information about the culturally appropriate text, iii) were able to elaborate upon the culturally appropriate text more easily and iv) produced more culturally based distortions of the cultural alien text.

There are also concerns over text structure or formal schemata. In the 1970s, a number of researchers, most notably Meyer (1975), identified a number of 'text structures' or patterns in a text. One such text structure is the 'problem-solution' structure, where a writer first describes a problem and then the solution to it. Another is the 'causation' structure which relates causes to effects. Text structures are joined together in multiple variations to form a text. Research (for example Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978) has shown how the availability of text structures aids reading in that they allow readers to identify and remember important points. The problem is that some studies have shown that text structures are culture-specific. Kachru (1996) cites the 1982 Smalley and Hank discussion that gives the English expository essay as an example. Typically an English essay consists of an introduction (including background knowledge and thesis statement), a body broken down into clear paragraphs (all of which include an elaboration of the thesis and supporting evidence thereof), and a conclusion. This, according to Kachru (1996), is not typical of other cultures. Korean essays, for instance, do not follow a linear writing convention like English essays do. German, Farsi, Chinese, Hindi, and Finnish do not follow the same convention as English either.

More recently, Kendeou and Van den Broek (2007) looked at the influence of background knowledge *and* text structure with an exploration of how their interaction affects the cognitive processes at work during the reading of specific scientific texts. They found that readers adjusted their reading processes according to the interaction between the two constructs.

So far in this review, research which has shown that both content schemata and formal schemata have an impact on reading comprehension has been summarized. But the effect of culture on reading extends beyond the texts themselves in relation to test-taking- to the reading comprehension questions following the texts. Not only can the individual characteristics of questions influence reader performance but so can the placement of the questions themselves.

With regards to individual characteristics of questions, Ozuru, Rowe, O' Reilly, and McNamara (2008) refer to studies that show the amount of extensive reasoning needed to answer a given question affects its level of difficulty. They also point out that some types of questions (especially multiple choice questions) need less strategies and less inter-textual work than other types of questions (such as, for example, open-ended questions). This in-and-of- itself could cause an experience of (cultural) bias if students are more familiar with one type of question than another due to the structure of their educational system and its assessment techniques. Khan (2006) points this out as a concern in her study on IELTS speaking prompts as some questions required greater use of higher order thinking skills than others. She claims that Bangladeshi students are not

very familiar with questions requiring critical thinking skills because the educational system in the country is predominantly based on rote learning.

Reading questions can be characterized a number of ways. One common way is to divide them into type and form. Day and Park (2005) offer up one such taxonomy for teachers to use as a checklist. This taxonomy consists of six different types of comprehension questions and five question form types (see table below).

Table 1

*Grid for Developing and Evaluating Reading Comprehension Questions (Day & Park, 2005)*

	Literal	Reorganization	Inference	Prediction	Evaluation	Personal Response
Yes/No						
Alternative						
True/False						
Wh-Q						
Multiple Choice						

Another popular form of categorization used in question analysis is Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). Bloom's taxonomy, when applied to questions, generates six different question types ranging from lower order to higher order thinking skills. The

lower order skills include knowledge questions and comprehension questions. The higher order ones include application questions, analysis questions, synthesis questions, and evaluation questions. To get a better understanding of these categories, examples are necessary. For instance, take the example of an IELTS reading on pagodas. A knowledge question would focus on the 'who, what, where, when' etc. Scanning skills would be used to answer these types of questions. An example of a knowledge question on this topic would be: How old is the oldest known pagoda? A comprehension question would be: Describe the religious significance of a pagoda. An application question, the first of the higher order thinking questions, would be: Compare the importance of pagodas in the daily lives of people long ago to today. An analysis question could focus on having the reader classify the various types of pagodas according to eras discussed in the reading. A synthesis question would include combining a number of ideas from the text to generate a new idea and an evaluative question would ask about a reader's personal thoughts or judgements on the matter.

Since this study will be looking at IELTS examination questions which do not tend to include the highest levels of thinking, Bloom's taxonomy is not the most appropriate choice of categorization of questions for this particular study. Instead, this research project will draw on components of Nuttall's 1996 categorization due to its simplicity and ease of applicability. Nuttall divides the question categories into two parts: forms and question types. The form of the question is important to note. Is the question open-ended, multiple choice, or true and false? What kind of question is it – literal, re-interpretive, inferential, or evaluative? Does the question require a personal opinion or

response of some kind? A detailed explanation along with examples of Nuttall's taxonomy will be given later in the methodology section of this thesis. It will be used in the question analysis part of this study to determine the types of questions found on the IELTS examination to see if they can be seen to lead to experiences of cultural bias on the part of the students in this study.

This leads into the placement of the questions on a reading examination – something, which at first thought, might not be of great concern. However, Leonard and Lowery's 1984 study on the placement of questions calls this assumption into question. A study was conducted on the retention of biology concepts and the placement of questions to see if there was a link in retention of information. The findings revealed that questions placed either in the middle or at the end of the passage were more conducive to the process of retention than the ones placed at the beginning of a passage. This then begs the question whether the placement of reading questions (not just question types) can be seen to lead to experiences or perceptions of cultural bias in any way as well. Unfortunately no studies were found on this issue.

The difficulty of a question, however, may not necessarily lie with the question type itself, according to Ozuru et al. (2008). Besides the necessary skills needed to find the answer in the text, a text's propositional density (P-density) may also affect how difficult it is to answer a given question and thus has been implicated as a major factor causing reading comprehension difficulties (Kintsch 1998, Kintsch & Keenan 1973). Propositional density refers to units of meaning which help a reader understand and remember a text (Covington, 2008). Every sentence in a text consists of numerous

propositions. Propositional density is measured by adding up the different parts of speech in a given text (generally the number of verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and conjunctions) and then dividing them by the number of words (Covington, 2008). A reading passage with a lower level of P-density is easier to comprehend. High P-density texts involve a greater amount of text processing. Although no research has been conducted to determine the P-density of an average IELTS reading text, it is assumed the examinations – due to their academic nature – have a high P-density factor. Part of this factor is the complexity of the syntax in the text, highlighted by the counting of subordinating conjunctions and adverbial connectors. Shiotsu (2003) explored the impact of syntactic knowledge and lexical knowledge on reading test performance and discovered that the former played a more central role. This confirmed the findings of a study done by Berman (1984) which found that heavy or dense sentence structure resulted in a decreased ability to process the text.

If this is the case, then candidates taking the IELTS examination would need to be familiar with this type of heavy density in reading. In some social contexts however – such as those prevalent in the UAE – reading these types of texts is not something students are exposed to regularly in their education or at home. In fact, in a survey done by the Arab League (Al Yacoub, 2012), only 22% of Emiratis consider themselves regular readers, suggesting students from this part of the world would have very little experience dealing with reading texts, let alone dense texts in English. This is simply not part of their socio-cultural experience.

Street's Ideological Model of Literacy (1984, 1993) contributes further to the understanding of how social context impacts reading. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, Street's sociocultural model is part of the New Literacy Studies which consider literacy to be a social practice rather than the simple acquisition and application of a set of skills. Reading is seen as a social act, embedded deeply in one's context. As discussed earlier, Street labels the historically accepted skills-based model as 'The Autonomous Model' (1984, 1993). In the Autonomous Model of literacy, according to Street, cultural assumptions are hidden and passed off as neutral, with the model ignoring the notion that literacy is anchored in culture. In his Ideological Model of Literacy, reading and writing are viewed as social acts and therefore direct expressions of social identity. Brice Heath's (1983) longitudinal study of families in two different communities confirms the idea of children being socialized to be literate. Brice Heath's study found forms of literacy to be influenced by society:

The ways of living, eating, sleeping, worshipping, using space, and filling time which surround these language learners would have to be accounted for as part of the milieu in which the processes of language learning took place. (1983, p. 3)

The study looked at families whose children were raised surrounded by print and at families whose children did not have access to books but experienced literacy through a myriad of reading tasks related to the home or shopping. These two very different kinds of literacies were a result of the social circumstances and conditioning present in the lives of the children. Their social realities determined what was read and how it was read. This

became part of the children's identity or way of being in the world. Gee (1990) refers to this as 'Discourse':

A Discourse is a sort of 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize. (1990, p. 142)

As children move on in life, they are faced with various different kinds of Discourses unfamiliar to them. One such challenge occurs when students reach university and are expected to be conversant in academic discourse.

If literacy is socially constructed and consequently part of one's identity, then the testing of it, according to Street (1984, 1993), is predisposed to bias. As a result, Street argues against the use of any form of standardized tests as within any standardized examination, there are socio-cultural contexts which privilege only a few, meaning any standardized examinations will privilege some socio-cultural contexts over others. Willis (2008) agrees with Street on this point, suggesting that reading comprehension tests in particular are a product of dominant groups in society. Willis contends that these groups embed their own ideas of the world into the tests to further advance their belief systems. Literacy, Street argues, cannot be measured in this manner as it differs from one context to another and one socio-cultural group to another. This then would render standardized tests such as the IELTS inappropriate at best and ineffectual at worst. In fact, according to Alderson (2000), there are several school boards in the United States that have already abolished the use of standardized testing in reading due to the potential bias of the

examinations. But not everyone agrees with this move. Carver, one of schema theory's biggest critics, believes acts such as these are rash and premature since there is no empirical evidence to warrant such drastic measures:

The direct evidence that activating prior knowledge facilitates comprehension during typical or normal reading is highly questionable. The direct evidence that standardized reading comprehension tests are biased because they contain no measure of prior knowledge is highly questionable. (Carver, 1992, p. 173)

Fairclough (2001), however, holds the same viewpoint as Street, particularly with regards to cultural assumptions being hidden in language. He reinforces the idea that language is a part of society and so in its very nature is social. This belief is based on social linguist Michael Halliday's work which views language as a function (Eggins, 2004). Language is there for meaning-making purposes and therefore influenced by social and cultural contexts. Fairclough (2001) posits that the act of engaging in language use, like the act of reading, is determined socially – in particular by power relationships. Gatekeepers, such as the IELTS, can create an uneven power dynamic. People who are taking the test and have differing linguistic and socio-cultural histories than the writers of the texts are at a clear disadvantage. When any given text is written, Fairclough (2001) contends, the producer unknowingly embeds his interpretation of the world into it, something Willis (2008) believes is actually done intentionally. When the time comes to decode the message, the interpreter brings a different world view to the process. This mismatch can then result in mistakes of interpretation. Willis (2008) reinforces this idea

by stating that a person's individual history, language, sex, class, ethnicity etc. can all influence the interpretation of a text. Readers need to negotiate between their realities and the one presented in the text. A text is therefore a *product* of the process of text production and a resource for the process of interpretation (Fairclough, 2001). Both these processes of production and interpretation are socially determined as they are conditioned by society as a whole. The social conditions of production influence the process of production and thus the text itself. Equally important is the interpretation of the text, the process of which is also influenced by social conditions- making the entire process of reading a social act.

Everett (2012) goes even further than this in his claims. Much like Willis, he views language itself as a tool for socio-cultural reproduction – an idea first put forward by Vygotsky, a developmental psychologist in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Vygotsky's studies found the educational evaluation of impoverished Russian children was culturally framed by the evaluators (Tyler, Stevens, & Uqdah, 2003). Everett (2012), like Vygotsky, argues that language is used to promote one's way of being, one's way of life. To support this statement, he cites his work with the Piraha of Brazil as proof. Their language is devoid of colour words and counting words because the people do not require the use of them in their daily lives. He contends that a language and all of its forms of expression – in the case of this study, the written word – draws on the socio-cultural contexts in which it is used. Willis (2008), however, posits that not only is the language used in testing awash with socio-cultural assumptions but also the construction of the test as well.

Given all this, it is reasonable to assume that the IELTS examination is replete with cultural capital (and the potential to lead to experiences of cultural bias) because of i) the nature of the reading process as a constructive process involving the use of both content and formal schemata and ii) the nature of the texts themselves. But is this truly the case? It clearly warrants further investigation.

### **2.3 The Definition of Culture**

Before the discussion of cultural bias can begin, it is imperative to first define the term 'culture'. The term has morphed in meaning over the centuries, first appearing in early dictionaries as a natural science definition of cultivation or caring for the soil. The term 'culture' was first used in relation to the social sciences about two hundred years ago and referred to the level of a person's sophistication rather than toiling of the land. It was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that the definition changed again to refer to "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1958, p. 1). This definition later grew to encompass the totality of humanity – both visible and invisible aspects. Government institutions, artefacts, architecture, and behavioural patterns are examples of physical manifestations of culture. Concealed aspects include such things as values and assumptions. A universally accepted definition, however, appears to be elusive. Between the years of 1920 and 1950 alone, over 157 different definitions of culture arose in anthropological literature (Kluckhohn & Kroeber, 1952). In fact, there are almost as many definitions of culture as there are people researching the phenomenon

(Kuh & Whitt, 1988). The ones most relevant for this research project include those of Tylor (see earlier description), Kroeber, Geertz, and Boas.

Kroeber (as cited in Cerroni-Long, 1999) believed culture to be man's guide in society even though, in his belief, man was both creator and promoter of culture at the same time. Geertz (1973) concurred with this definition and further defined the term as that which allows an understanding of societal experiences. According to Geertz, culture encompasses belief systems, rituals, and traditions that guide people either individually or as a group.

Boas (as cited in Cerroni-Long, 1999), like Kroeber, also maintained that culture is constructed by people, asserting – however - that language is its main transmitter in society. Of equal importance was Boas' role in promoting the idea that mankind's behaviour was predominantly determined by habitual action steeped in tradition (Stocking, 1966).

With human beings so intricately involved in the creation and perpetuation of culture, it stands to reason, then, that culture is not a static entity but rather a responsive phenomenon, changing over time and permeating all that humankind does. This study acknowledges the ever-changing nature of culture and its various definitions. Since the study will focus on social realism, however, Archer's (1995, 1996, 1998) definition of culture as the beliefs, value systems, and ideologies of a society will be used as a guide for this study. Culture, in this study, will be understood to be discursively constituted, thereby making discourse a mechanism in the realm of the real in Bhaskar's layered ontology – all of which will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

With this in mind, a review of the research related to cultural bias in testing and reading comprehension in particular is needed.

## **2.4 Research on Effect of Culture on IELTS and other Standardized Language**

### **Tests**

Very little research has been done pertaining to cultural bias or experiences of cultural bias and content validity of the IELTS examination. Bias in content validity occurs when a task or test item is more difficult for one cultural group than another due to lack of exposure or experience with the item or topic (Reynolds, 1998).

One of the few studies done on the cultural bias of the IELTS examination was conducted in Southeast Asia on the speaking component of the examination. This study, completed by Khan (2006), revealed that limiting cultural bias was largely up to the interviewer her/himself.

Khan (2006) conducted her study in Bangladesh on IELTS examiners, not examinees. She claims that the IELTS examination is not ideally suited for the Bangladeshi as candidates are often unable to understand the creative lateral thinking needed to succeed on the test. This is due to their educational system's emphasis on memorization and repetition. Khan highlights Weir's (1990) claims that success on a speaking examination depends on several factors, of which background or socio-cultural knowledge is a considerable component.

Khan's study of 16 examiners' responses concluded that interviewers chose topics carefully in order to avoid misunderstandings in prompts. The topic 'holidays and

weekends' was not a good choice, for example, because the two concepts are indistinguishable in Bangladeshi culture. Another speaking topic 'solitude' was not something examinees were familiar with either. In Bangladesh, solitude is an alien concept because Bangladeshis never live alone. A third example of a socio-culturally inappropriate topic was 'pets'. Although animals abound for agricultural purposes, the Bangladeshi people do not keep pets. Their main concern, according to Khan's examiners, is to keep their own body and soul together in the underdeveloped country.

Another relevant study, conducted by Hawkey (2005), found that of 572 IELTS candidates surveyed, 27% expressed perceptions of 'unfairness'. Of this percentage, unfamiliarity of topics appeared in second place at 21%, coming right behind the factor of 'time pressure'. In response to the question "Is this test appropriate for all nationalities/cultures?", 73% of the 97 surveyed post-examination indicated a positive response. The remaining 27% included 'target culture bias on topics and materials' as one of their main reasons for a negative response.

Hawkey's research stops at these findings and the only other research to be found even slightly related to the topic of socio-cultural bias on the IELTS is from a study done by Green (2007). The study itself focused on the effect of washback and examined what type of programme (EAP or IELTS) resulted in better writing scores for students taking the IELTS. In his findings, Green mentions what he refers to as a "persistent source of disquiet" referring to the "cultural accessibility" of task 2 writing topics (2007, p. 214). The study found different cultural groups viewed some writing topics to be non-issues, citing the Chinese and the topic of animal rights as an example. Also, according to some

respondents in the study, the rhetorical writing style used in the IELTS favoured that of European students.

Moore, Morton, and Price (2012) recently analyzed thirteen IELTS reading examination papers for task types. The goal was to determine which types of questions appeared the most on the reading component to see if these questions matched the literacy practices required at university. Results indicated that true/false/not given questions were highest in percentage followed by summary-type questions and matching questions. This study will further investigate the use of questions through a similar analysis of question types. It will, however, use a different number of readings in its sample and a slightly different categorization of questions before linking the results to the socio-cultural context of the education system in the UAE rather than to the appropriateness for academic university study.

Overall, this research project is crucial to exploring further any bias experienced by IELTS test takers and the reasons for this experience as little has been done in this regard. But IELTS is in good company here. Research into cultural bias on other standardized language tests is not much more prevalent either, but there are a few examples to draw from.

Chen and Henning (1985), for instance, identified various test items on the ESLPE (English as a Second Language Placement Exam) in California (used for university entrance), that showed some cultural bias. The researchers set out to determine if linguistic background or the L1 of test-takers had an impact on their overall test performance. The study included only two cultural groups represented in the student

body (out of more than 30 groups). 77 native Chinese speakers and 34 Spanish native speakers sat the ESLPE which consisted of five sections or subtests of 30 items each. Results showed that the Chinese students outscored the Spanish in all sections except vocabulary. It turned out that there were some vocabulary items on the test, albeit not many, that favoured Spanish students. Even though the bias may have been minimal, any amount of differentiation of results is cause for concern as it indicates test bias (Clouser & Mazor, 1998). Even if the test is regarded as valid, if there is a difference in performance related to any number of factors, including linguistic background, then this could be referred to as a source of bias (Zumbo, 1999).

Schellenberg (2004) emphasizes that standardized testing displays gaps between test scores of different cultural groups regardless of the fact that the groups have access to the same level of education and education system in the United States. At first it was believed that achievement tests showed gaps in diverse groups because of unequal access to educational systems. Later, when this changed with time, unequal access was shown not to be the cause of the gaps. This prompted test publishers to try to control for bias on standardized tests more with a special focus on item bias. But this, Schellenberg (2004) fears, may have taken the focus off of construct validity as a whole. Even though many attempts have been made to rectify the problem of 'fairness' on standardized tests used in the American education system, achievement gaps continue to haunt test publishers.

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the main competitor to IELTS, has been accused of harbouring cultural bias as well. Traynor (1985) examined 150 items of the test for references related to America, hypothesizing that the test is

written to favour those intimately familiar with America, its people, its history, and way of life. Traynor found that 30% of the items related to Americana and concluded the test showed “strong, even intense” cultural bias (1985, p. 45). This conclusion was later challenged by Angott (1989) who examined more closely the results of test-takers who were familiar and unfamiliar with American culture. His study found no evidence to prove the Americana content influenced test-takers’ performance. This, however, contradicts the findings of Chihara, Sakurai, and Oller (1989) whose study concluded that the changing of culturally unfamiliar items in reading passages (such as names of people and places) to more culturally familiar ones resulted in a significant increase in cloze scores.

The instructional background of subjects – which is influenced by socio-cultural contexts – can have an effect on standardized test performance as well. Kunnan (1990) held the differing instructional backgrounds of two Asian groups (Chinese and Japanese) responsible for their differential performance on the ELSPE. Studies done by Ryan and Bachmann (1992) on subjects taking the First Certificate of English (FCE) and the TOEFL draw similar conclusions.

The next section will explore how culturally familiar texts and topics affect reading as a whole – which is the focus of this research study.

## **2.5 Familiarity and its Effect on Reading**

**2.5.1 Introduction** As indicated earlier in this chapter, the familiarity of a topic, also known as content schemata or background knowledge, has a significant effect on

reading. This is not a new revelation and is substantiated by numerous studies. Piaget established long ago that new knowledge is learned by relating it to one's current knowledge base (Piaget, Gruber, & Voneche, 1977). This base – in turn – is influenced by one's culture. This section is devoted to a deeper exploration of this phenomenon by focusing in detail on some of the studies done on young adult (high school aged) and adult second language (L2) learners and reading to date.

**2.5.2 Significant Studies** A number of valuable studies have been conducted worldwide on the effect of cultural familiarity on reading. A historical analysis of these studies places Johnson's (1981) work front and centre.

Johnson investigated the effect of the cultural origin of a piece of folklore on university students' reading comprehension. He had Iranian and American students read folklore from each other's culture. Johnson's findings showed that the cultural origin of the reading played a more significant role on comprehension than did syntactic or semantic difficulty. His findings revealed a distinct difference in performance between non-members and members of the cultural group from which the tale originated with members faring much better.

A similar study was conducted a few years later by Steffenson and Joag-Dev (1984) on American students and Indian students. This study focused on descriptive cultural readings instead of folklore. It was determined that reading comprehension was closely linked to the degree of cultural familiarity of the descriptive readings as well, further substantiating Johnson's findings.

Soon after, Carrell (1987) explored the phenomenon further by investigating the role of cultural familiarity of texts with Muslim Arab and Catholic Hispanic students. She, too, confirmed the findings of the two earlier studies. Her findings also indicated that the readings related to the students' own cultures were better comprehended.

But the research does not stop there. A couple of years later, Malik (1990) confirmed the importance of having accessible cultural schemata for successful reading comprehension. This study was done with adult proficient language learners from Iran.

To further substantiate the importance cultural topic familiarity plays in reading comprehension, we can look at Brantmeier's (2003) study for confirmation. The study was conducted on intermediate Spanish language learners with the goal of determining the role of gender and passage content on L2 reading comprehension. Her study also provides evidence that subject familiarity has a positive effect on reading comprehension.

This phenomenon, not surprisingly, appears to cross various cultural and linguistic boundaries and seems to be true in most cases. In fact, the only evidence one might consider contrary to the aforementioned findings is Park's 2004 study which indicated that cultural knowledge significantly impacted listening comprehension *more* than reading comprehension.

Equally as important is the reach of culture beyond the text – for its influence is not limited to reading comprehension alone. Its reach extends to activities related to the texts as well. These include exercises, tasks, and questions related to vocabulary acquisition, strategy use, and the making of assumptions. The latter is evidenced by Gatbonton and Tucker's 1971 study which established a link between unfamiliar reading

passages and the making of incorrect assumptions. Pritchard (1998) noted a positive influence of cultural schemata on the processing strategies used in reading while Pulido (2004) discovered a co-relation between the familiarity of a text and incidental vocabulary acquisition.

Whereas other studies exist detailing the important role of culture in various aspects of the reading process and related text tasks, they tend to be focused on an age group unrelated to this particular research study. Hence the exploration of this concept will cease here since the afore-mentioned studies and the previous discussions have already firmly established the significant effect that culture can have on reading comprehension.

In Chapter 3 the thesis will move on to explain the theory – that of critical and social realism – used to frame this study.

## Chapter 3

### Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Introduction

Why philosophy? Collier (1994) addressed this question by explaining that ‘no’ philosophy is simply bad philosophy since within us all lies a philosophical approach to life. This approach is invariably applied to our everyday activities - including work and research- even if it is done unknowingly. It touches all spheres of our activities and is, in fact, extremely hard to avoid (Craig, 2002). Every day questions such as ‘What should I do?’, ‘Who am I?’, and ‘How do I know?’ fall into the category of philosophy.

Researchers, therefore, need to take an intimate look inside their world of thoughts, beliefs, and behaviour before beginning any given research work as this influences ‘the lens’ from which they view their research. Their ‘lens’, in turn, functions as their searchlight: “what the searchlight makes visible will depend upon its position, upon our way of directing it, and upon its intensity, colour etc.” (Popper, 1995, p. 490).

This chapter will devote itself to explaining the main tenets of the philosophy that serves as the ‘searchlight’ for my research project. It will begin with a detailed look at a movement in philosophy called critical realism (CR), beginning with its historical roots and moving on to its role as ‘underlabourer’ in both natural and social science research- something which Bhaskar believes “to be an essential (though not only part) of the business of philosophy...” (2008, p. 31).

Within this section, what constitutes reality and what can be considered to be ‘truth’ will be examined through the eyes of Bhaskar. This exploration is followed by an

investigation of Archer's social realism with a particular focus on structure, culture, and agency and how they can be used as a theoretical framework for the methodology of this study.

## 3.2 Critical Realism

### 3.2.1 Introduction

A movement in philosophy, social theory and cognate practices that seeks for science and other ways of knowing in order to promote the cause of TRUTH and FREEDOM, hence the transformation of social structures and other constraints that impede that cause and their replacement with wanted and needed ones, or emancipation. (Hartwig, 2007, p. 96)

Critical realism first came to life in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany. It began with Immanuel Kant's response to Hume's empirical philosophy of direct experience being the only way to knowledge. According to Hume, experience and observation lead to the acquisition of knowledge and that this "*science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences*" (Hume, 2013, p. 9). It is the visible association of constant conjunctions (not causes) of events or experiences that brings this 'knowledge' about.

Kant was one of the first to challenge this premise of scientific thought by claiming that both the senses *and* the intellect (something which Hume rejects) could bring about the acquisition of knowledge: "Neither experience nor reason is alone able to

provide knowledge...Only in their synthesis is knowledge possible” (Scruton, 2001, p. 24). Admittedly though, Kant concedes that the process itself can only begin with our ‘experience’ of the world as he states in his introduction in the Critique of Pure Reason: “There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience” (Kant, 1787, paragraph 1).

In Kant’s view, it is our senses that give us information about the ‘appearance’ of a thing but it is our reason and understanding that takes hold of this and shapes our concept of it (Craig, 2002). Our knowledge of the natural laws of the world then is a direct result of our ‘human understanding’ of it. This occurs because our experience of something is processed through the human mind and ‘things in themselves’ – without our human filter - are essentially unknowable (Kant, 1787). In his preface, Kant writes:

...though we cannot know these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to think them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears. (1787, p. B xxvi-xxvii)

This act of processing experience through the human mind renders all knowledge ‘subjective’ with the ‘objective truth’ fundamentally unknowable for how could someone know something that is ‘other’ to him? (Scruton, 2001). Kant explains this as follows:

In the subjective sphere being and seeming collapse into each other. In the objective sphere they diverge. The world is objective because it can be other than it seems to me. So the true question of objective knowledge is: how can I know

the world as it is?... can I have knowledge of the world that is not just knowledge of my own point of view? (Scruton, 2001, p. 19)

The early critical theorists in Germany agreed with Kant's philosophical view of knowledge being subjective but took exception to the idea that the objective truth was not accessible. Popper – a 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher with critical rationalist tendencies - is of two minds here as well. In one case he agrees with Kant - conceding that the objective truth is “hard to come by” (Popper, 1985, p. 260) and in another he agrees with the critical theorists' view that the truth is –even if only at times - accessible: “more often than not, we may miss it by a wide margin” (Popper, 1963, p. 16).

The essence of critical theory, however, did not begin here. It existed a long time before the twentieth century - with the earliest critical theorists dating back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.. Socrates and other philosophers used reason and rationale to criticize the conventional wisdom of the people in power – a concept that lies at the heart of contemporary critical theory. But critical theory has more modern roots as well -with Immanuel Kant playing a significant role in its development historically. Kant was one of the forerunners of the movement in the sense that he employed the faculty of reason to fight social injustice and oppression (Bronner, 2011).

The first ‘generation’ of modern critical theorists, however, did not appear until the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The movement itself is said to have originated in Germany - predominantly at the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt. The work of the group of philosophers associated with the Institute became known as the ‘Frankfurt School’. The

Frankfurt School was a philosophical movement rooted in social and political thought developed by such prominent theorists as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, and – later - Juergen Habermas (Bronner, 2011). This newly-developed movement of wide-ranging interdisciplinary critique and reflection had a significant impact on academic thought and academic institutions around the world. In essence, the institute and its members reinterpreted Marxism and attempted to address a wide variety of social, political, and economic problems – in effect using knowledge to transform society (Corradetti, 2011).

Critical theory was conceived within the intellectual crucible of Marxism...But its leading representatives...were concerned less with what Marx called the economic ‘base’ than the political and cultural ‘superstructure’ of society. Their Marxism was of a different variety. (Bronner, 2011, p. 2)

Some of its fundamental concerns related to the critique of modern societies – especially capitalist ones – as well as the promotion of social emancipation, something which is also central to critical realism:

In this chapter I want to readdress the question of the exact form of the realism required (a) to combat empiricism...and idealism...and (b) more generally, to aid and empower the sciences, and especially the human sciences, in so far as these illuminate and inform projects of human self-emancipation. (Bhaskar, 2011, p. 180)

Social theory, to the Frankfurt group, was meant to be critical in nature in the sense that its task was understood to be to probe and appraise existing systems of social power which had been built on irrational thought. An example of this would be the idea that men are superior to women. The School's primary purpose at the time was to uncover injustices concealed in society as a result of irrational thought. The initial drive behind the establishment of the Institute was the creation of a 'Marxist think tank' so it is no surprise to find elements of Marxism in its midst. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the School's critical theory tried to reach beyond Marx and expand on his ideas in order to create strategies for emancipation (Corradetti, 2011). Whereas Marx blamed economics for humanity's enslavement and general plight, the Frankfurt School looked beyond the capitalist system for answers, at times even dismissing Marx's economic determinism (Bronner, 2011). Central to Marx's philosophy were the beliefs that human alienation was a direct result of society's economic systems and that the only way to change this oppression was through material force or what he called – practical activity (Singer, 1980). Marx's call for unity of theory and practice was heeded by the Frankfurt School who actively waged war against the oppression and exploitation deeply embedded within western society (Bronner, 2011).

The Frankfurt School and its critical theory were the roots of critical realism- as the term 'critical' implies. The name itself, critical realism (CR), did not come into use until much later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – not until CR's true founding father – Roy Bhaskar - came to the scene. The name stems from a combination of terms coined by Bhaskar although the act of combining them cannot be attributed to Bhaskar himself: critical

naturalism and transcendental realism. True to its roots, research in this philosophical domain devotes itself to the promotion of social justice and acts as an interface between the natural and social worlds. Whereas there have been three distinct developments in CR – all introduced by Bhaskar –, it is the first movement, termed ‘basic CR’ (Bhaskar, 2012) that informed the study on which this thesis is based.

Critical realism came into being during Bhaskar’s doctoral studies in Britain. There he familiarized himself with the philosophy of science as well as social science and then set out to establish a school of thought able to address both in one (Hartwig, 2008). His primary goal at the time was to “provide a comprehensive alternative to (the) positivism...” (Hartwig, 2008, p. 29) since “the prevailing models of explanation underpinned by Humean theory of causal laws – did not apply...” (Hartwig, 2008, p. 12) to Bhaskar’s own social research. His first book *A Realist Theory of Science (RTS)* published in 1975 (see Bhaskar, 2008) focused on what he coined ‘transcendental realism’ – which refers to the investigation of the natural world via an analysis of deeper mechanisms at play. In his book, *RTS*, Bhaskar speaks of two major philosophical traditions in science which predate the theory of transcendental realism: Hume’s classical empiricism and Kant’s transcendental idealism (Bhaskar, 1989). He characterizes Hume’s philosophy as one where the objects of knowledge are events consisting of a stimulus of facts and their subsequent conjunctions. Kant, on the other hand, sees knowledge as a “construction of the human mind” (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 25). The position Bhaskar puts forward - transcendental realism- views objects of knowledge as “the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena” (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 25). It was

developed out of a reaction to and rejection of the aforementioned philosophies. Neither the belief that ‘what I observe is real’ nor the notion that ‘my reality is different from that of everyone else’ resonated with Bhaskar (Hartwig, 2008).

Basically, in *RTS* Bhaskar argues that reality is not as simple as the positivists claim nor need be as diverse as the relativists assert. He maintains that an absolute reality exists but that it is outside the realm of human experience and thought: “Perception gives us access to things and experimental activity access to structures that exist independently of us...” (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 30). Only a fraction of the absolute truth is ever available to mankind at any given point in time while we experience the world: “Nor do I think the objects of science exhaust reality. On the contrary, they afford only a particular angle or slant on reality, picked out precisely for its explanatory scope and power.” (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 14)

The truth is available to us through the processes of abduction and retrodution but not directly accessible as the positivists claim. These processes allow us to reach “the tendencies of things, not the conjunction of events” (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 31).

Reality, Bhaskar argues, runs deep and is multi-layered. It is made up of three overlapping domains – the empirical (what the positivists view as the truth- the observable), the actual (the event), and the real (Bhaskar, 2008). The layer of the real is from which the actual and the empirical emerge.

The above concepts need further explanation as they constitute the essence of this research project's theoretical framework. Consequently, a number of noteworthy principles will be explored in greater depth in the next section.

### **3.2.2. The Critical Realist Ontology**

#### **Principle 1: The Independence of Mechanisms**

Transcendental realism argues for a philosophy of science where there is an existence of generative mechanisms beyond the human experience of the world. When the human race comes to observe entities, it does so through the lens of humanity, not through the lens of objectivity or ‘what-is’. The practice is socially mediated. This means we come to the observation of an entity already influenced by our social world. Therefore the observance itself is influenced by our social world. We do not see ‘what is’ rather we see ‘what is for us’. As a result, Bhaskar (2008) argues that the existence of something (the intransitive) and our knowledge of something (the transitive) do not complement each other in logic or time- one is independent of the other. Something exists first. Then, if we are lucky, we can begin to know parts of it.

If man ceased to exist, sound would continue to travel and heavy bodies fall to the earth in exactly the same way... the tides would still turn and metals conduct electricity in the way that they do... (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 21)

The world, according to Bhaskar, is made up of mechanisms – not events. These mechanisms lie at the heart of the phenomena we experience in the world. But this begs the question, what is a mechanism? Bhaskar refers to mechanisms as “intransitive objects of scientific theory” (2008, p. 47) that are independent of mankind but that “generate the states and happenings of the world” (2008, p. 47). They are knowable and in no way artificial in nature and may, at times, even be real in the sense of manifest. To

sum up though, a “generative mechanism is nothing other than a way of acting of a thing” (2008, p. 51). Bhaskar refers to these generative mechanisms as causal structures since they explain a given phenomenon. Bhaskar insists that causal structures and mechanisms are separate from the events that they generate just like the latter are separate from man’s experiences of said events. He characterizes them as “aspects of reality that underpin, generate, or facilitate the actual phenomena that we may (or may not) experience” (Bhaskar & Lawson, 1998, p. 5). This brings us to our next principle – the different layers of reality.

### **Principle 2: Reality has Depth**

Ontologically speaking, critical realism views reality as layered and complex (Bhaskar, 2008). It is this claim of ontic depth that Harre has exalted as being one of the most significant philosophical advances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (MacLennan, 1999).

According to Bhaskar, there are three overlapping domains to this complex reality – the experience or empirical, the event or the actual, and the mechanisms or the real. Bhaskar sums this concept up in the following diagram (2008, p. 56):

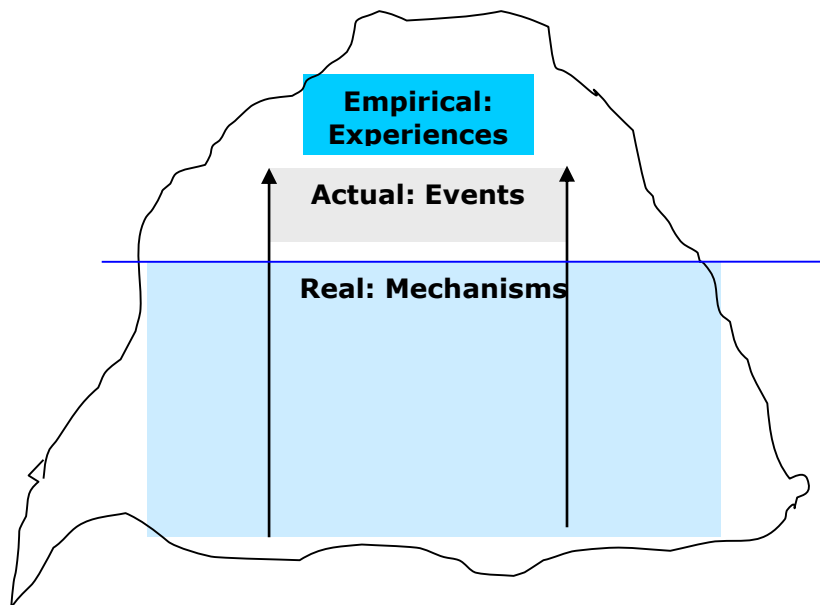
---

	<i>Domain of Real</i>	<i>Domain of Actual</i>	<i>Domain of Empirical</i>
<i>Mechanisms</i>	✓		
<i>Events</i>	✓	✓	
<i>Experiences</i>	✓	✓	✓

---

*Figure 7: The three domains*

To better understand this table, one needs to have closer look at the various levels of reality. The empirical is the observable layer. This layer refers to what is actually ‘experienced’ or ‘seen’ and thus constitutes what the positivists hold as ‘truth’. However, Bhaskar argues that this is merely the tip of the iceberg.



*Figure 8: Three layers of reality in iceberg form*

The real reasons for the observations or experiences at this level are attributed to the mechanisms at play at the other layers of reality – especially the level of the real. These layers of ontic depth were collapsed into one by the positivists and held up as truth. But the empirical, Bhaskar argues, is made up of experiences and experiences are only part of the world – and socially determined at that (Bhaskar, 2008). It is important to recognize that all three layers are in play at one time when a given experience emerges. It is one moment in time, not three separate time frames. Nor is one layer more ‘real’ than

another: “It is important to stress that I am not saying that experiences are less real than events, or events less real than structures” (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 58).

The domain of the real, however, is where the ‘unchangeable’ or the ‘intransitive’ resides. It is here where one discovers what is responsible for the event and experience – its causal mechanisms or structures.

### **Principle 3: Causal Powers and Emergence**

The “generative mechanisms of nature exist as the causal power of things” (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 40). A generative mechanism is a causal agent because it holds causal power. It is important to note here that a generative mechanism is not necessarily one ‘thing’ but the interaction of various individual properties. This interaction, then, causes *emergence* into the realm of the actual. The causal power itself, however, is not reducible to its parts. That which emerges is a collective of individual properties but not a sum of its parts that is easily divisible back into its original components (Sawyer, 2001).

The concept of emergence did not originate with Bhaskar. In fact, it has a long and dynamic history. It first appeared in Lewes’ critique of Hume’s philosophy (Sawyer, 2001). Lewes (1875) defined something as emergent if it could not be predicted from its parts nor reduced back into its parts – a definition matching Bhaskar’s philosophy. Lewes gave ‘water’ as an example to help us understand the concept better.

Hydrogen and oxygen are the individual compositional parts of water. It is a combination of these that causes the properties of water to emerge. Yet water cannot be reduced back into its parts. It is the interplay between the parts that brings about the emergence of something new (Lewes, 1875).

It is important to note here that any causal laws derived from causal powers need to be viewed as ‘potentialities’, not laws per se. The reason for this is that powers may or may not be in play at any given time – a concept that confounds the empiricists to this day (Collier, 1994). Bhaskar goes even further to delineate a difference between potentialities and tendencies. Tendencies, he asserts, are “potentialities which may be exercised or as it were ‘in play’ without being realized or manifest in any particular outcome.” (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 37). Therefore, we should be speaking in terms of ‘tendencies’ in scientific research rather than causal laws. These tendencies of things can be phrased into law-like statements called ‘normic statements’ which emphasize the independent existence of things and describe a way of acting (Bhaskar, 1998). Research in the domain of critical realism then focuses not on the prediction of events but rather on what things tend to do or how they are acting at a given point in time. This is clearly at odds with the empiricists’ point of view of constant conjunctions. But Bhaskar insists there is nothing complicated about the concept of generative mechanisms and their abilities to remain unexercised. A generative mechanism:

endures, and under appropriate circumstances is exercised, as long as the properties that account for it persist... There is nothing esoteric or mysterious about the generative mechanisms of nature, which provide the real basis of causal laws. (Bhaskar, 2008, pp. 51-52)

It can all be explained by the concept of an open, rather than closed, system.

**Principle 4: An Open System**

All three domains of reality are part of an ‘open system’. This means that all mechanisms and structures found within may or may not be operating at any given point in time. An open system relates to the following: when a given phenomenon is observed at the empirical, the reasons or causes behind the phenomenon depend on what powers or tendencies are operating at the time and which remain inactive. This is because the real domain, as mentioned earlier, is filled with ‘possibilities’ not ‘certainties’. Since a mechanism can exist without ever being exercised, whenever someone observes and tries to understand a given phenomenon, s/he must take into consideration that there are “unmanifest actions of things” (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 37) at work.

In short, an open system is a malleable system – a system susceptible to change. The empiricists conduct experiments in a closed system – where one mechanism alone is operational due to its isolation. It is this unnatural act of ‘separation’ in the laboratory that allows for a causal relationship to occur, bringing about the same effect over and over again. But this is not a true reflection of the real world where no such isolation can occur naturally: “Outside a closed system, these (mechanisms) will normally be affected by the operations of other mechanisms... so that no unique relationship between variables... will be possible” (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 39).

Only in a closed system can we state for certain that X causes Y. In fact, it is only in an artificially controlled environment where one mechanism (X) can bring about (Y) since “it is characteristic of open systems that two or more mechanisms...combine to produce effects” (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 119). Constantly-conjoined events do not ordinarily

occur in the natural and social worlds since there is no human control of the environment (Collier, 1994). The conjoined event is then first and foremost caused by human activity as Bhaskar (2008, p. 33) points out: "...in an experiment we are a causal agent of the sequence of events but not of the causal law which the sequence of events ...enables us to identify."

This clearly implies that causal laws operate separately from mankind thereby offering up proof that our natural and social worlds operate in an open system. In an open system, we cannot be unequivocally certain that an event (Y) is generated by a specific mechanism (X) for we do not know which mechanisms are in play and which have remained dormant. Active and non-active mechanisms co-exist in an open system side by side. A good example of this is the power of water to both boil and freeze.

If some powers are operational and others are not, it begs the question – how do we know which generative mechanisms are responsible for an event?

An analysis can be done by moving through the three layers of reality – starting with the experience at the empirical and moving to the actual and the real to abstract the mechanisms at play. The following general example might better illustrate this point.

A child experiences fear at the sight of a snake. This is the empirical level – the realm of reality to do with the senses. The event that brought this experience about is the physical sighting of the snake or what Bhaskar terms 'the actual'. The underlying reason for the fear, however, has nothing to do with the event and everything to do with the mechanisms at play at the level of the real. So to understand the child's observable

reaction of fear, one must look deeper. One needs to ask ‘what must reality be like to bring this experience forth?’

For instance, one possible cause of this reaction could be cultural in nature – social conditioning. Some cultures teach their children to fear snakes. Others – such as some societies in India - view snakes as holy creatures to be honoured and protected. A child with the latter cultural upbringing would have a very different reaction to the ‘event’ of seeing a snake than the earlier mentioned child. The ‘event’ of seeing a snake would play out entirely differently in that case. Here we can clearly see the three different domains in play – the experience, the event, and the causes or mechanisms. Note how a child’s experience (depending on his/her socio-cultural background) would be different to the same event due to the mechanisms at work in the realm of the real.

The analysis of an experience through the three layers of reality results in the acquisition of knowledge. Epistemologically speaking, however, any knowledge gained through CR studies is limited in scope. Since this knowledge is often brought to light via the processes of human retrodution and abduction (see next page), it is inherently flawed. The human element makes the acquired knowledge fallible and allows, at best, human beings to ‘know’ only a fraction of an absolute reality. The researcher comes to understand the knowledge through his/her own beliefs, experiences, ethnicity, social conditioning, level of education and personal history. Nagel (1986) supports this view as well stating that a social scientist’s view is always from ‘somewhere’. As a result, the knowledge gained is fallible and should be used only for the understanding of a phenomenon, not the prediction of phenomenon. This notion of fallibility makes way for

the possibility of multiple interpretations of one absolute reality. What one researcher sees is not necessarily the same as what another researcher sees due to all the human factors involved. However all perspectives are a glimpse of the real, which lies beyond the human condition and is independent of human action.

It is this type of abstraction along with the process of abduction that brings about the production of knowledge in CR – processes that are further defined in the next section.

### **Principle 5: Processes for the Production of Knowledge**

Retroduction involves the reconstruction of the conditions that facilitated a phenomenon to emerge in the first place. This process can use the analysis of descriptive data to arrive at this reconstruction- asking the question ‘*why*’ the data appears in a given pattern (Olsen, 2009).

Retroduction, according to Sayer (1992, p.107), is a "...mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them...". An example of this would be Chindarkar's (2007) attempt to address a perceived pattern of suicides in farmers in India. Chindarkar believed that attributing the suicides solely to poor economic conditions was a mistake – a deeper analysis was needed. Results of the analysis showed that the economic pain experienced by the farmers was only the surface explanation. By adopting a critical realist approach, Chindarkar unearthed causes beyond the broad economic scope such as the breakdown of the emotional base and the disruption of inner human space. The analysis indicated that

micro-level factors played a significant role in the suicides and that men and women took their lives for different reasons.

Abduction, on the other hand, involves the use of existing theory to identify and understand the mechanisms at play in the realm of the real. Here researchers make use of substantive theory or relevant theory to identify the mechanism or structure causing the emergence. Theories are compared, dissected, and amalgamated to bring forth a deeper understanding of phenomena (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2011). The goal is not to identify all the mechanisms but rather to pinpoint the key mechanisms at play with the strongest explanatory power (Sayer, 1992).

It is important to note, however, that the social world is not separate from the agents who live within it. It is affected by the actions and the ideas of the agents themselves. Bhaskar tries to address this complex interplay in his Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA). Following is a summary of his model:

People do not create society. For it always pre-exists them and is a necessary condition for their activity. Rather, society must be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions which individuals reproduce or transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. Society does not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification). But it is not the product of it (the error of voluntarism). ... Society, then, provides the necessary conditions for intentional human action, and intentional human action is a necessary condition for it. Society is only present in human action, but human action always expresses and utilizes some or other social form. (Bhaskar, 1979, p. 36)

Bhaskar is not alone in addressing the importance of human agency. Archer also addresses this in her theory of social realism. She suggests a simple way to categorize the intertwined mechanisms and structures found in the domain of the real -albeit for the sake of analysis only- by creating three main categories: structure, culture, and agency. The following section will outline this analytical framework to be used in my study and delve more deeply into Archer's social realism.

### **3.3 Critical Realism and Social Science**

As mentioned earlier, Bhaskar tackled the development of a new ontology for both the natural and social worlds. In social science, the goal is to understand society and its various processes, which translates into understanding the cause of an occurrence (Manicas, 1998). Consequently, social scientists do not typically concern themselves with constant-conjunctions of events because the very nature of society is not regular. The sporadic nature of social regularities makes it close to impossible to “make predictions with any high degree of certainty” (Danermark, Ekstroem, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002, p. 68). But this is a relatively new belief. Historically, there was a prevailing assumption that the natural world and the social world were markedly the same, consisting of objective systems. This transfer of empirical theory and methodology from the natural sciences to the social sciences resulted in numerous faulty predictions and “unsuccessful social prognoses” (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 66). However, if the goal of social science is to understand society, then the empiricists' aim of predicting events does not serve any purpose in social research at all - least of all because prediction can

occur without even the most minimal of understanding (Manicas, 1998). Understanding something, therefore, is not tantamount to predicting something. A new perspective was needed as an alternative to the empirical view – something Bhaskar brought to the scene through his CR philosophy.

Now, thanks to Bhaskar, we can view society differently- as a complex and dynamic ‘open system’ with many different concurrent structures, agents, and mechanisms at play (Sayer, 2000). Since there is no consistency in an open system, it should come as no surprise that there is an absence of predictable sequences of events. “There is more to the world, then, than patterns of events” (Sayer, 2000, p. 15).

Critical realism is ideal for social science work for a number of reasons. Firstly, it provides a rationale which is critical of social practices and views people as causal agents - allowing for enormous emancipatory possibilities and social change. “If people are causal agents, they are capable of re-fashioning society in the direction of greater humanity, freedom, and justice” (Manicas, 1998, p. 322).

Secondly, it allows for a deep analysis of the structures and mechanisms generating events in social situations. Realist social theory or social realism, most notably developed by Margaret Archer, essentially takes the ontology of critical realism and applies it to the social world. Historically, social scientists tended to conflate structures of society and agents of society – either one way or the other. In other words, it was either the parts of society (structures, organizations, culture) that organized the behaviour of man or the other way around with man determining societies’ structures. Archer was one of the first to argue against this conflation of structure and agency – admitting there is an

interplay between them but nothing more. Archer believes conflation of the two- either upwards where “parts dominate people” or downwards where “people orchestrate the parts” (Archer, 2004, p. 1) - is completely unnecessary since the two operate in entirely different time frames. To Archer, the argument that “either the parts **or** the people are held to be the ultimate constituents of social reality” is not valid (Archer, 2004, p. 5), maintaining that they only exist because of one another (Danermark et al., 2002). This means that societal systems – divided into structure and culture- have a great deal of autonomy but do not exist in a vacuum from each other or human agency. In fact, agency is so integral to the notion of ‘emergence’, that it cannot be ignored or conflated. Since human agency (action) is needed to *activate* the powers in the domains of structure and culture at the level of the real, it involuntarily creates its own generative powers. This translates into all three categories (structure, culture, and agency) as having emergent properties. Archer refers to these emergent properties as social emergent properties (SEP), cultural emergent properties (CEP), and personal emergent properties (PEP) which all intermingle in complex ways. Mechanisms in these three domains can remain dormant or “reinforce one another” or “frustrate the manifestations of each other” (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 56).

In her book *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (1995), Archer outlines an alternative framework –one which further develops the concept of Bhaskar’s Transformational Model of Social Action where neither society nor man is responsible for the creation of the other (Wikgren, 2005). This framework links the properties and powers of society and its people without conflation. Within this new framework, social

scientists are able to better explore the structures and mechanisms (SEPs, CEPs, and PEPs) at work in a given social situation as the framework does not “render one level of social reality inert and thus reducible” (Archer, 2004, p. 6). According to Archer, in order for us to better understand the social world, we need to have a better understanding of the structural, cultural, and agential components that make up the realm of the real. Structure and culture exercise their powers by constraining or enabling an actor/agent thus causing social events to occur (Elder-Vass, 2012). To gain a better understanding of how powers constrain and enable through Archer’s Morphogenetic Framework, we first need to know how the categories of structure, culture, and agency are defined.

Structure can be defined as anything related to material resources and the distribution thereof in society as well as patterns of behaviour (Archer, 1995, 1996, 1998). Into this category fall such things as gender, education, marriage, ethnicity, and social class – and anything to do with how a society organizes itself like “roles, organizations, institutions, systems, etc.” (Archer, 1996, p. 1).

Culture is separate from structure as the two domains are “substantively very different” (Archer, 1996, p. xii). Since culture has been subsumed under structure for so long, there is no repertoire of established constituents available. Archer, however, attempts to define the cultural domain as the beliefs, value systems, and ideologies of a society (Archer, 1995, 1996, 1998). This domain includes the notion of ‘discourse’ which this study draws upon in the analysis part of its research. Although various definitions exist, this study will apply Kress’ (1989) description of discourses as:

... systematically organized sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that, they define, describe, and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and – by extension- what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution, whether marginally or centrally. (1989, p. 7)

Culture is therefore discursively constituted, making discourse a mechanism in the cultural domain of the real. An example of a discourse found in this study is that of the idea that ‘reading is unimportant’. This is a set of ideas held by the cultural group being studied which contributes to the emergence of events and experiences the group describes. In other words, the cultural discourse of ‘the unimportance of reading’ in Emirati culture is one of the reasons that students experience what they do whilst sitting the IELTS reading examination.

Agency refers to people, their psychological disposition with regards to their function in society, and their individual ability to act autonomously through their own reflexivity (Archer 1995, 1996, 1998). The latter, according to Wiley (2010) is a skill most normal people possess to some degree which affords agents insight into the possible consequences of their behaviour. Archer (2007) defines reflexivity as the conscious conversations that occur within an individual. It is the ability of a human being to reflect or to exercise his/her mental skills to assess his/her place in the world. This ability is considered a personal power and therefore a generative mechanism in the realm of the real. Human beings have the choice of how they react in a given situation, even if

constraints are in place. For one to understand a given action, Archer insists we take a closer look at the internal conversation that took place leading up to the action. This internal dialogue, according to Wiley (2010), is part of who we are and drives our actions. Vandenberghe agrees with this, claiming we do not hold conversations but rather- we *are* the conversation: “We are as much in the conversation as the conversation is in us” (Vandenberghe, 2010, p. 55). Archer does not go this far in her definition even though she confirms internal conversations are integral to agency and that there is no such thing as a passive agent. While she accepts the idea that structures exist and manipulate action, Archer contends it is never at the expense of the agent. The agent is always choosing the action.

To gain a greater understanding of these crucial inner dialogues, Archer (2007) divides them into three different modes of reflexivity: communicative, autonomous, and meta-reflexives. It is important to note here that Archer believes people are who they are because of the concerns they have or the projects they care about: “... our personal and social identities are epistemologically vulnerable. Both hinge upon our ultimate concerns and commitments” (Archer, 2004, p. 2).

These concerns are evident in Archer’s categorization of the different types of reflexivity and are seen to play a clear role in their definitions. Since this research which brought forth the development of these types of reflexivity was conducted in England, the categories may or may not be relevant worldwide. Nonetheless, the categorization is useful background knowledge for this research project since it highlights the various ways human agency *may* work. A basic review is included here as a result.

The communicative reflexives, according to Archer, are those people who think and talk things through. They tend to be female and extroverted in nature and generally turn to significant others to resolve their issues. Family and friends (their main concern) are held in high esteem and are their main source of advice which often leads them to replicate their familial background. Their traditional actions strengthen, not challenge, their existing social worlds.

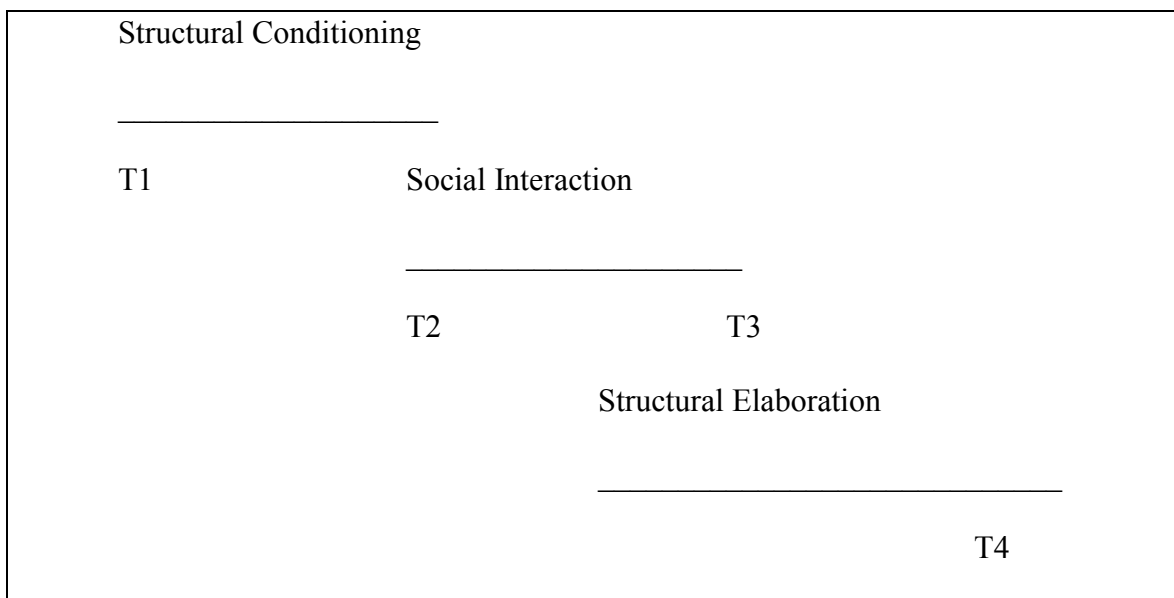
The autonomous reflexives, on the other hand, are nearly the complete opposites. Firstly, they tend to be male, not female. Secondly, they are individual in nature and have independent thought. Work (their main concern), not family and friends, appears to be their principal concern and they have no qualms in challenging any constraints holding them back from their goals. While their actions do not benefit the family, they do strengthen society as a whole.

Then there are the over-thinkers, the meta-reflexives. These are the idealists in society who are trying to self-realize (their main concern). They seek the impossible and are often unhappy as a result, moving from place to place, job to job, in search of the ideal. They tend to be impervious to the enablements and constraints of society.

There are the odd actors who do not neatly fit into Archer's three categories. They are the fractured-reflexives. This group of individuals has trouble holding a meaningful internal dialogue and tends to have no projects or ultimate concerns to guide them, resulting in a feeling of disorientation. When human agency is addressed, the above categories of reflexivity are helpful in determining what happened and why.

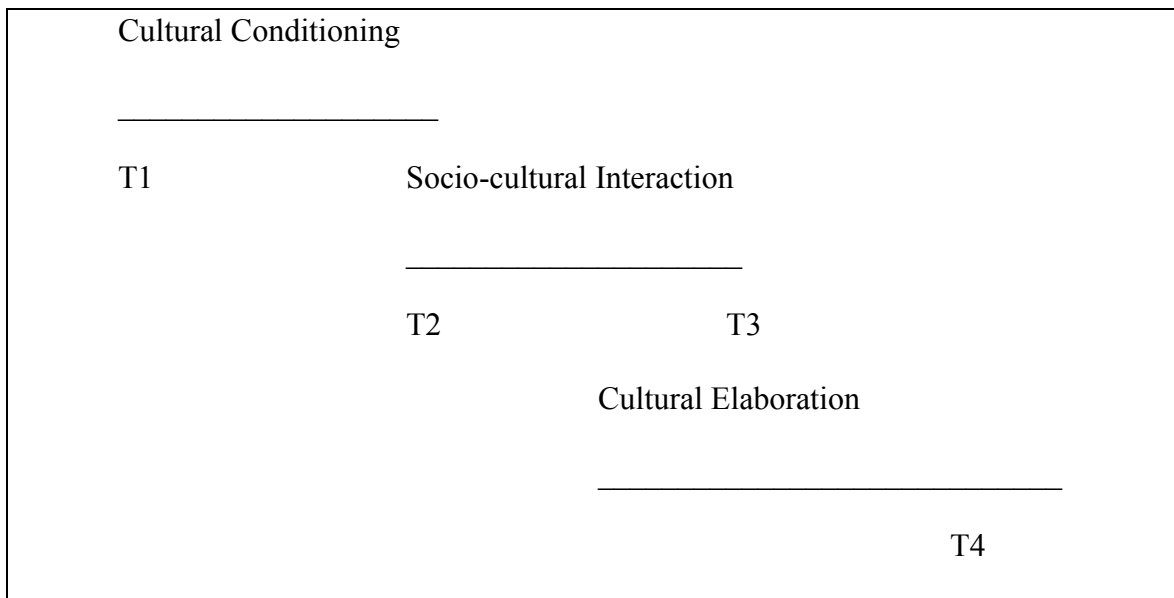
Now that we have had a deeper look at the three categories of structure, culture, and agency, we can move on to Archer's Morphogenetic Framework. Although this study will not be using this framework for analysis per se, the research will identify the mechanisms (SEPs, CEPs, and PEPs) operating in the realm of the real with *an understanding* that the parts are not fully separate from each other- as the morphogenetic cycle illustrates. Thus an understanding of this cycle serves as important background knowledge. A brief overview is presented here for this purpose.

Archer's framework is used separately with each system (structural, cultural, and agential). It begins by choosing a point in time as a starting point (T1). Once the start of a change is introduced (T2) and interaction occurs (T3), there is either elaboration or reproduction that takes place (T4).

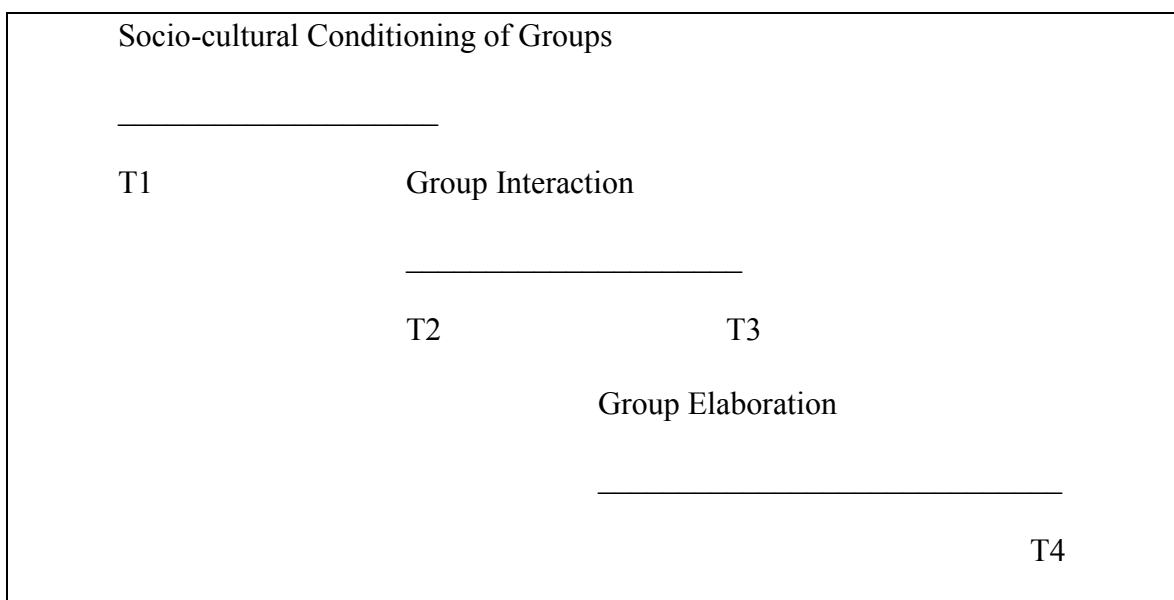


*Figure 9: The Morphogenesis of structure (Archer, 1995, p. 193)*

If there is no change to the structure (state of reproduction), then morphostasis has occurred. If there is indeed a change (state of elaboration), then morphogenesis has taken place. The same format can be applied to both the cultural and agential domains.



*Figure 10: The Morphogenesis of culture (Archer, 1995, p. 193)*



*Figure 11: The Morphogenesis of agency (Archer, 1995, p. 194)*

From this framework, one can deduct that the growth or said elaboration of society and the advancement of social change rely – partially at least – on man’s agency and his ability to be reflective. To gain further understanding of this approach, the earlier example of the child afraid of the snake can be used for illustrative purposes.

The child’s social conditioning has been to fear snakes (T1). The child is placed in an educational programme that teaches him/her about snakes and how to handle them (T2 –T3). At the end of the programme, the child is exposed to a snake again. If his/her reaction (T4) is the same as before, no change has occurred (morphostasis). If, on the other hand, the interaction has made a change in the child’s reaction of fear, then morphogenesis has taken place.

How does all this relate to the research at hand? Archer’s categories in her framework and Bhaskar’s levels of reality can easily be combined for analytical purposes in social realist research. The following chart is a result of this union and will be applied to the focus group part of this study.

↑	<b>Empirical</b>	<b>Experiences, Observations</b>		
	<b>Actual</b>	<b>Events (Question/topic of reading)</b>		
	<b>Real</b>	<b>Structure</b>	<b>Culture</b>	<b>Agency</b>

*Figure 12: A Framework of analysis combining Bhaskar (1979) and Archer (1995; 1996)*

To illustrate how this chart will be used in this research, one can look at a relevant example - the experience of bias that an Emirati female student says she felt while sitting

the reading component of the IELTS examination. The student claims the topic on one of the examination readings is not something she is familiar with and that this has put her at an unfair disadvantage. The underlying reasons for her not knowing the topic could be structural, cultural, or even agential in nature or all three since there is often more than one mechanism involved in the production of an event (Danermark et al., 2002).

In this case, for example, the topic (let's say of Arctic Snow) is not something she is familiar with because of a) structural reasons (SEP): her educational system never taught her about the Arctic and its weather or geography and b) cultural reasons (CEP): her family does not allow her to travel (a woman must have permission from her father, brother or husband to travel) – let alone to non-Islamic parts of the world and c) agential reasons (PEP): her communicative mode of reflexivity reinforces the female cultural norms of her familial and societal expectations by choosing not to travel to the Arctic on her own.

How these mechanisms are identified and substantiated will be outlined in the next chapter – that of this study's methodology.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Methodology**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The goal of this research study is to explore how the reading component of the IELTS examination can lead to experiences of cultural bias on the part of Emirati students. This exploration will be done in the form of a case study done through the lens of critical realism – outlined in the previous chapter. Since this study investigates current phenomena, a case study is an ideal approach to take (Yin, 1984).

This chapter will explicate the research design in more detail. There are three different components to this study – a model advocated by Gillham (2000) in case studies: the content analysis (including a syntactical analysis of the readings), the question analysis, and the focus group analysis. Each one will be addressed separately in this chapter with regards to subjects, instruments of analysis, and procedures. The reasons for using a multi-method approach will be outlined after the various methods have been discussed.

#### **4.2 Content Analysis**

Content analysis is an analytical technique applied to a variety of research data including documents, papers, data, transcripts, discourses etc. where you identify and count references or words and phrases for either existence or frequency. Historically, this technique is closely linked with quantitative studies and originally designed to deal with large amounts of raw material (Bryman, 2012). In this technique, the focus is on

establishing precise categories and counting ‘instances’ – either for existence or for recurrence. Instances are systematically identified, coded, and grouped before being analyzed quantitatively (Silverman, 2011). It is the systematic nature of this tool that affords it its objectivity (Bryman, 2012). It is extremely important to design a fool proof coding system to enable other coders to yield the same results. In this way, any possible concerns of reliability and validity are already addressed.

This quantitative use, however, is now being challenged. A debate is currently raging about the appropriate use of this technique in research: “One of the leading debates among users of content analysis is whether analysis should be quantitative or qualitative” (Berg, 2001, p. 241). From a critical realist perspective, the use of this technique serves to describe the experiences at the level of the empirical and the events of the actual.

The reading components of the IELTS examination underwent a content analysis to gain insight into two things: the cultural capital found in the readings and the syntactical difficulty of the readings. The ability for this method to yield such data relatively quickly lies at the heart of its choice. The steps for both the cultural content analysis and syntactical analysis can be found in the procedure section of this chapter.

**4.2.1(a) Subjects (Cultural Content)** To reiterate - the purpose of the cultural analysis of the contents found in the reading components of the IELTS examination was to determine the *existence* of culturally familiar aspects in the readings, where the ‘existence’ refers to the unfamiliar events students encounter in the realm of the a

actual. This was done on 20 IELTS examinations for a total of 60 reading passages. The ‘subjects’ – in this case ‘the examination readings - were taken from past examinations published by Cambridge. The examinations were chosen for their topics and were purposely taken from a variety of books to reflect different years of tests. The table below and on the next pages outlines the examinations and the titles of the passages used in this analysis. Participants in the focus group part of the study sat selected examinations from this list. These selected examinations underwent a syntactical analysis as outlined in this section.

Table 2

*Cambridge IELTS Examination Reading Topics (Subjects of Study)*

Book 6: Tests 1,2,3,4	Sports Science in Australia 6.1.1 International Commerce and Trade 6.1.2 Climate Change and the Inuit 6.1.3 World Bank’s Study of Public Transport Efficiency 6.2.1 Health and Lifestyle of Ageing Population Study 6.2.2 Development of Number System 6.2.3 Cinema: Beginnings and Effects 6.3.1 Motivation of Employees under Adverse Conditions 6.3.2 Anti-aging Research Advances 6.3.3 Effects of Pharmaceutical Marketing 6.4.1 Children of Literate Mothers Better Off 6.4.2
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	Bullying in Schools 6.4.3
Book 7: Tests 1,2,3,4	<p>Bats: How Engineers Could Help Them See at Night 7.1.1</p> <p>Water: history and current policies on water 7.1.2</p> <p>Power of Suggestion: A New Learning Approach 7.1.3</p> <p>The Resilience of Japanese Pagodas 7.2.1</p> <p>The True Cost of Food 7.2.2</p> <p>Makete Rural Transport Project 7.2.3</p> <p>The Intelligence of Ants 7.3.1</p> <p>Origins of the Native American Population 7.3.2</p> <p>Forest Decline in Europe 7.3.3</p> <p>One theory of how Pyramids were built 7.4.1</p> <p>Alaska Salmon Industry 7.4.2</p> <p>Effects of Unpredictable and Predictable Noise 7.4.3</p>
Book 4: Tests 1,2,3,4	<p>Study on Children's Scientific Knowledge of Rainforests</p> <p>4.1.1</p> <p>The Senses of Whales, Dolphins, and Porpoises 4.1.2</p> <p>Visual Symbols and the Blind 4.1.3</p> <p>Death of Minority Languages 4.2.1</p> <p>Alternative Medicine in Australia 4.2.2</p> <p>The Brain and Playing 4.2.3</p> <p>Lessons Learned from Street Youth Programs: Impoverished Young People 4.3.1</p>

	<p>Power of Volcanoes 4.3.2</p> <p>Obtaining Linguistic Data for Research 4.3.3</p> <p>Human Sporting Performance 4.4.1</p> <p>The Nature and Aims of Archaeology 4.4.2</p> <p>Scarcity of Health Care Resources 4.4.3</p>
Book 2: Tests 1,2,3,4	<p>Airports built on Water 2.1.1</p> <p>Understanding of 'Health' 2.1.2</p> <p>Deductive Reasoning in Children 2.1.3</p> <p>Implementing Hotel Organization Model 2.2.1</p> <p>Language Barrier Problems 2.2.2</p> <p>Port Cities 2.2.3</p> <p>Absenteeism in Nursing 2.3.1</p> <p>Car Problems and Solutions 2.3.2</p> <p>Biometrics- technology that identifies people 2.3.3</p> <p>Green Consumers 2.4.1</p> <p>Illiteracy and the Role of Pictures 2.4.2</p> <p>Human Genome Project: Genes 2.4.3</p>

Book 3: Tests 1,2,3,4	History of the Rocket 3.1.1 Dangers of 2nd Hand Smoke 3.1.2 Scientific Research Method 3.1.3 The Dung Beetle 3.2.1 Government Farming Policies 3.2.2 Concept of Role Theory 3.2.3 Ethnography Collections 3.3.1 Indian Influence on the Amazon 3.3.2 Hormone Levels and Moods 3.3.3 Air Pollution 3.4.1 History of Votes for Women 3.4.2 Measuring Organizational Performance 3.4.3
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**4.2.2(a) Instruments of Analysis (Cultural Content)** The content analysis was based on a limited number of Lazar's (1993) list of cultural aspects: objects, products or things (eg. camel trappings), social structures and roles (eg. doctors as highly-esteemed citizens), customs and traditions (eg. a festival), proverbs and expressions (eg. hand in glove), political or historical settings (eg. Australia in 1994), superstitions or beliefs (eg. magic as evil) as well as geographical locations.

**4.2.3(a) Procedures (Cultural Content)** To conduct a content analysis, several steps must be closely followed (Colorado State University, 2013). These are as follows:

**Step 1:** Decide what kind of analysis is going to occur. This refers to single word or set of words and if the coding will be for existence or frequency.

**Step 2:** Decide the number of concepts to code for. Concepts and categories need to be created and defined to limit the analysis.

**Step 3:** Come up with a coding system. Colours, numbers, and abbreviations are often used.

**Step 4:** Do the analysis and code the texts.

**Step 5:** Analyze the results.

This study coded for *existence only* of Lazar's list of cultural capital with the procedure as follows:

**Step 1:** Analysis was for single or set of words (=1 concept) and coded only for existence (not frequency)

**Step 2:** Six components of Lazar's (1993) list of cultural components were used. If there were any references (either with or without an explanation or detailed description) to the following, they were recorded (an example is given for each category for a clearer understanding):

- a) cultural objects, products or items: a 'talking stick'
- b) customs, traditions, and festivals: La Tomatina
- c) political and historical terms or events: Germany 1945
- d) proverbs and idiomatic expressions: head for the hills
- e) social structures, relationships, and roles: father as homemaker

f) beliefs and superstitions: magic is evil

To assist with the identification of a, b, c, e, and f the following question was employed in the analysis: Is \_\_\_\_\_ (concept/product/belief) more/less part of my shared cultural knowledge than another cultural group's? If the answer was yes, it went on the list.

**Step 3:** The following coding system and colour system was used:

CO = cultural objects etc. (yellow)

CT = customs and traditions (green)

PH= political and historical references (pink)

PE= proverbs and expressions (orange)

SR= social structure etc. (blue)

BS= beliefs and superstitions (purple)

**Step 4:** Texts were analyzed and colour-coded as per Step 2 coding. If the same reference was made more than once in the same passage, it was only highlighted and counted once.

**Step 5:** Colour-coded instances were added up and put into chart format for quantitative analysis.

**Step 6:** Triangulation with other instructors.

This content analysis is, at least in part, subjective due to the interpretative nature involved with identifying cultural items and concepts students experience as unfamiliar at

the level of the actual. It serves to identify the background knowledge students bring to the reading at hand and which content schemata students draw on as they exercise their agency as readers. In theoretical terms, the content schemata students drew on was placed into the category of culture at the level of the real.

To remedy the subjectivity, the list of cultural objects and beliefs and social roles (the other categories are clearly identifiable) isolated by the researcher were given to three other instructors for confirmation through discussions. An example of a subjective placement was the term ‘monsoon’. This word was found in one of the IELTS readings but was not a term easily understood by all students. Even if the students had recognized this as a ‘powerful rainstorm’ found in India and Southeast Asia, only a small number of the students would have had firsthand knowledge of this phenomenon. Perhaps, the word ‘storm’ would have been a less culturally laden word choice. The question ‘Is \_\_\_ a monsoon \_\_\_ more/less part of my shared cultural knowledge than another cultural group’s?’ was applied. The answer, according to the researcher, was ‘yes’. It was less a part of my shared knowledge (a person from the West) than a person from India. To ensure the inclusion of this word on the list was correct, three other instructors from Khalifa University looked at the word and contributed their insights – from two perspectives: that of an Emirati student and that of other international students. If they all agreed it was culturally laden, the item stayed on the list. If they all agreed it was not culturally laden, it was removed. If one or more disagreed, reasons for and against the item’s removal from the list were discussed. The final say, however, remained with me,

the researcher. This process was put in place to triangulate the data and give the content analysis more validity.

A separate analysis was done on references of geographical locations on the examinations. Each reading passage was examined for the reference of cities, countries, and regions in the world. If any location was repeated inside the passage, then it was not recorded again. However, the analysis coded for *frequency* over all the passages to establish the number of times certain locations were referred to.

**4.2.1 (b) Subjects (Syntactical Analysis)** The examinations that underwent a syntactical analysis were the 5 different examinations the students sat in their focus groups. This made up a total of 15 reading passages from the examinations.

**4.2.2 (b) Instruments of Analysis (Syntactical Analysis)** To gain an understanding of the grammatical difficulty of the IELTS tests, the passages were analysed for the *frequency* of the use of clauses and reduced clauses as well as the passive voice.

**4.2.3 (b) Procedures (Syntactical Analysis)** To identify the syntactical difficulty of the texts, each text underwent the following steps.

Step 1: Underline all the clauses and reduced clauses

Step 2: Add these up and record them

Step 3: Highlight all the passive voice

Step 4: Add these up and record them

Step 5: Compare the results to the other tests, average them out

### 4.3 Question Analysis

Research has shown that culture can emerge in question types as well, with some types of questions experienced as easier by one cultural group than by others as a consequence of their educational background - as Khan noted in her IELTS study (2006). Therefore, an analysis was conducted on the questions of the examination as well. The analysis consisted of categorizing every question related to the readings on the examinations.

**4.3.1 Subjects** The questions following the readings were also ‘events’ (in the realm of actual) that influenced what was experienced at the level of the empirical. There were 40 questions on each reading examination of the IELTS. The students in the study took 5 different examinations. Each one of these examinations had its questions identified and labelled beforehand by the researcher. This left a total of 200 questions to be analyzed. Since the categorisation of questions is a relatively objective task (a question is either literal or not, true or false or not etc.), no triangulation with other instructors was needed in this part of the analysis.

**4.3.2 Instruments of Analysis** To further explore the question formats, the questions needed to be analyzed in a systematic form. To do this, an analytical coding system was put in place. This study used four of Nuttall’s (1996) categories of question types as not all of her categories were found on the IELTS examination: *literal* (L), *rethinking* (R), *inference* (I), and *evaluative* (E) questions. These types of questions can be found in various formats, however. Nuttall refers to the following question formation types: *yes/no questions* (YN), *true/false questions* (TF), *Wh questions* (WH), *multiple-*

*choice* questions (MC), and *alternative* questions. The alternative questions can be further categorized into the following units of measurement: *fill-in-the blanks* (AFB), *summary* (AS), *matching* (AM), *classification* (AC), *labelling* (AL), and *short answer* (SA).

To be certain that there is a clear understanding of what each category includes, a brief overview with examples of question types and question forms follows.

### **I. Question Type Explanation and Examples**

**Literal:** A *literal* question, in this study, was defined as one in which the answer is easily found through scanning. The answer is clearly presented in the text and requires NO analysis, synthesis, or rethinking of any kind. Nuttall (1996) classifies these questions as those whose answers can be found directly in the texts.

Example:

(Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 1, Reading Passage 1, p. 18):

*Perkin originally named his dye Tyrian Purple, but it later became commonly known as mauve (from the French for the plant used to make the colour violet).*

*Q 10: What was the name finally used to refer to the first colour Perkin invented?*

*Answer: Mauve*

**Rethinking:** A *rethinking* question consists of two kinds in this study. Any kind of question that needs different parts of the text combined to get the correct answer is a rethinking question. In essence, it requires some form of reorganization of the textual parts (Nuttall, 1996). Also, in this category, *literal* questions whose answers appear in synonym form in the text were included. The reason for this was the extra step involved in processing the answers. A type of ‘rethinking’ needs to take place here in order to get the correct answer.

Example:

(Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 1, Reading Passage 2, p. 23):

*There is considerable debate over how we should react if we detect a signal from an alien civilization. Everyone agrees we should not reply immediately. Quite apart from the impracticality of sending a reply over such large distances at short notice...It is not important then if there is a delay of a few years, or decades, while the human race debates the question of whether to reply, and perhaps carefully drafts a reply.*

*Q 17: Choose the correct heading for paragraph E.*

#### ***LIST OF HEADINGS***

- i Seeking the transmission of radio signals from planets*
- ii Appropriate responses to signals from other civilizations.*
- iii Vast distances to Earth’s closest neighbours*
- iv Assumptions underlying the search for extra-terrestrial*

*intelligence*

A 17: ii

**Inference:** An *inference* question, in this study, was one that required the use of logic and the ability to read between the lines. More synthesis is normally needed here than a simple reorganization of textual parts. Nuttall (1996) defines this question type as one whose answer is not explicitly stated but implied through the words.

Example:

(Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 3, Reading Passage 3, p. 71):

***Paragraph B***

*It was the longest repair job in history...and a triumph for NASA engineers...While at Bell Laboratories, Shannon developed information theory, but shunned the resulting acclaim. In the 1940s he single-handedly created an entire science of communication which has since inveigled its way into a host of applications...*

*Which paragraph contains the following information?*

*Q 29 A reference to Shannon's attitude to fame*

A 29: B

**Evaluative:** This type of question requires the reader to make a judgement based on the information given in the text. It often requires advanced skills to process correctly (Nuttall, 1996). Since judgements are often subjective in nature, not many of these types of questions can be found on the IELTS examination.

Example:

(Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 2, Reading Passage 1, p. 43):

*Q 13 What is the writer's overall purpose in writing this article?*

*A To compare different methods of dealing with auditory problems*

*B To provide solutions for overly noisy learning environments*

*C To increase awareness of the situation of children with auditory problems*

*D To promote New Zealand as a model for other countries to follow*

*A 13: C*

## **II. Question Formation Explanation and Examples**

**Yes/No:** This question entails choosing from a Yes/No/Not Given answer. It is often used to see if the reader has an understanding of what the writer is saying.

Example:

(Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 2, Reading Passage 3, p. 52):

*Do the following statements agree with the claims of the writer in Reading Passage 3?*

*YES if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer*

*NO if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer*

*NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this*

*Q 32 Exposure to different events forces the brain to think*

*differently.*

**True/False:** This question asks whether or not there is an agreement with the information in the text, not the writer. The choices are from True, False, or Not Given.

Example:

(Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 1, Reading Passage 3, p. 27):

*Do the following statements agree with the information given in Reading Passage 3?*

*TRUE*                      *if the statement agrees with the information*

*FALSE*                     *if the statement contradicts the information*

*NOT GIVEN*             *if there is no information on this*

*Q 31 Turtles were among the first group of animals to migrate back to the sea.*

**Wh-Questions:** A *Wh- Question* refers to a question that begins with one of the following words: who, where, what, when, why, and how. Answers to these questions can be single word or paragraph length, depending on the choice of wh-word and the information requested by the question. On the IELTS reading questions, however, most wh-questions are limited to three word answers.

Example:

(Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 1, Reading Passage 3, p. 27):

*Choose NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS from the passage for each answer.*

*Q 27 What had to transfer from sea to land before any animals  
could migrate?*

**Multiple Choice:** *Multiple choice* questions ask test-takers to choose from an answer from a number of choices (often three or four choices). This is a common form of question on many kinds of tests.

Example:

(Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 1, Reading Passage 3, p. 29):

*Q 40 According to the writer, the most significant thing about tortoises  
is that*

*A they are able to adapt to life in extremely dry environments*

*B their original life form was kind of primeval bacteria*

*C they have so much in common with sea turtles*

*D they have made the transition from sea to land more than once*

**Fill in the Blanks:** This form of question involves completing a gap with missing information. For this IELTS examination, this form applies to all fill-in-the blank exercises including the summary ones.

Example:

(Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 1, Reading Passage 3, p. 28):

*Method of determining where the ancestors of turtles and tortoises come from*

**Q34**

*Step 1*

*71 Species of living turtles and tortoises were examined and a total of 34*

\_\_\_\_\_ *were taken from the bones of their forelimbs.*

*Complete the summary using the list of words, A-I below.*

***The language debate***

*According to 9 ....., there is only one correct form of language. Linguists who take this approach to language place great importance on grammatical 10 ..... . Conversely, the view of 11 ....., such as Joseph Priestley, is that grammar should be based on 12 .....*

<i>A</i>	<i>descriptivists</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>language experts</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>popular speech</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>formal language</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>evaluation</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>rules</i>
<i>G</i>	<i>modern linguists</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>prescriptivists</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>change</i>

**Summary:** This form of question consists of writing a summary for a paragraph or passage. The IELTS test does have summary type questions but they are either *fill-in-the-gap* or *multiple choice* - which automatically subsumes them into one of the other categories.

**Matching:** This form of question asks test-takers to match two things together. On the IELTS this usually entails matching headings to paragraphs.

Example:

(Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 4, Reading Passage 3, p. 96):

*Choose the correct heading for paragraphs B-E from the list of headings below.*

***List of Headings***

- i Commercial pressures on people in charge*
- ii Mixed views on current changes to museums*
- iii Interpreting the facts to meet visitor expectations*
- iv The international dimension*
- v Collections of factual evidence*
- vi Fewer differences between public attractions*
- vii Current reviews and suggestions*

*27 Paragraph B*

*28 Paragraph C*

*29 Paragraph D*

*30 Paragraph E*

**Classification:** This form of question asks test-takers to classify information into specific groups.

Example:

(IELTS, Reading Passage 2, The Triune Brain, adapted from:

[www.takeielts.britishcouncil.org](http://www.takeielts.britishcouncil.org)):

*Questions 14 -18*

*Classify the following as typical of*

*A the reptilian cortex*

*B the limbic cortex*

*C the neocortex*

*14 giving up short-term happiness for future gains*

*15 maintaining the bodily functions necessary for life*

*16 experiencing the pain of losing another*

*17 forming communities and social groups*

*18 making a decision and carrying it out*

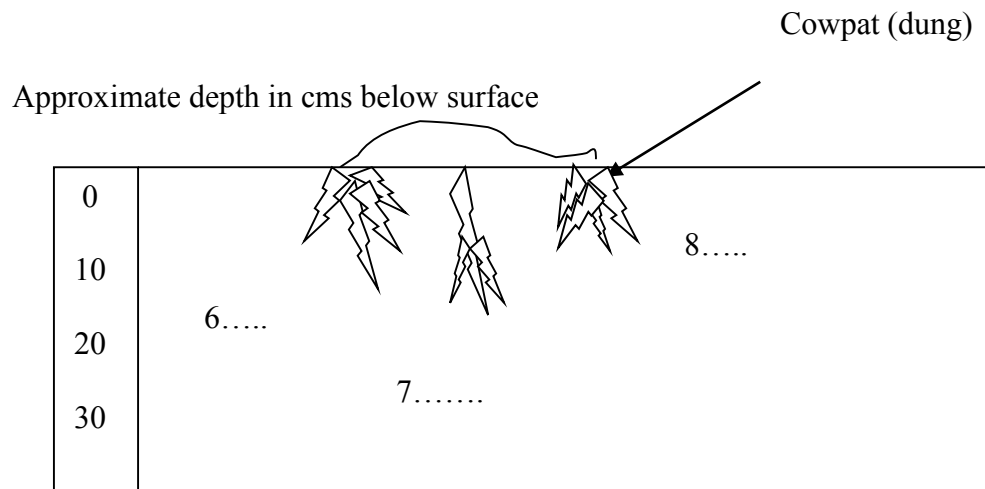
**Labelling:** A *labelling* question on the IELTS examination asks test-takers to label a diagram related to the reading.

Example:

(IELTS, Academic Reading Sample, adapted from: [www.ielts.org](http://www.ielts.org))

*Questions 6 -8*

*Label the tunnels on the diagram below using words from the box.*



***Dung Beetle Types***

*French*

*Spanish*

*Mediterranean*

*South African*

*Australian*

*South African ball roller*

**Short Answer:** *Short answer* questions refer to questions that need a short paragraph type answer. Since this makes the marking of the question relatively subjective, it is not found on the IELTS examination. A made up sample is included here for illustrative purposes only:

Text Sample:

(Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 2, Reading Passage 1, p. 41):

- C Children with auditory function deficit are potentially failing to learn to their maximum potential because of noise levels generated in classrooms. The effects of noise on the ability of children to learn effectively in typical classroom environments are now the subject of increasing concern...*
- Q Outline at least three potential noises children in a classroom setting have to deal with.*

**4.3.3 Procedures** The question analysis was conducted by the researcher reading each passage on the examination and answering each question. Once this was completed, the researcher labeled the question according to the four major categories and the format of the question- giving 40 different categories from which to choose. The following coding system (in reference to this) was used:

Table 3

*Coding System for Question Analysis*

<b>LYN</b>	<b>LTF</b>	<b>LWH</b>	<b>LMC</b>	<b>LAFB</b>	<b>LAS</b>	<b>LAM</b>	<b>LAC</b>	<b>LAL</b>	<b>LSA</b>
<b>RYN</b>	<b>RTF</b>	<b>RWH</b>	<b>RMC</b>	<b>RAFB</b>	<b>RAS</b>	<b>RAM</b>	<b>RAC</b>	<b>RAL</b>	<b>RSA</b>
<b>IYN</b>	<b>ITF</b>	<b>IWH</b>	<b>IMC</b>	<b>IAFB</b>	<b>IAS</b>	<b>IAM</b>	<b>IAC</b>	<b>IAL</b>	<b>ISA</b>
<b>EYN</b>	<b>ETF</b>	<b>EWH</b>	<b>EMC</b>	<b>EAFB</b>	<b>EAS</b>	<b>EAM</b>	<b>EAC</b>	<b>EAL</b>	<b>ESA</b>

To further explain the above, let's look at some examples. The top tier consists of all *literal* type question formats. LYN stands for *literal yes/no* question and the last one

LSA refers to *literal questions in short answer form*. The second tier shows the different types of *reinterpretation* or *reorganization* questions possible on the examination. RMC, for example, stands for a *multiple choice* question that requires the skill of *rethinking* and *reorganizing* information. The third one refers to *inference* type questions with IAC, for example, referring to an *inference* question that needs *classification skills*. The last tier lists the *evaluative* type questions. EAFB, for example, stands for *evaluative-alternative-fill-in-the-blanks*. This question means the higher order skill of judgement is needed to complete a *fill-in-the-blank* question.

Once the chart was completed with the number of instances of question forms, the data in the table was subject to two treatments. Firstly, averages of each question type were calculated to see what types of questions occurred the most on the IELTS examination. Then each examination was examined again to evaluate the questions according to Nuttall's (1996) categories. To assess questions on a test, Nuttall advises several procedures of which the following four apply to this study:

- 1) Are there any questions on the test that can be answered without reading the passage? This category was coded as AWRP (N) with the (N) standing for the answer we want: NO.
- 2) Are there questions addressing all parts of the passage? Are they evenly distributed? This category was coded QAAP (Y) with the (Y) standing for the answer we want: YES.

3) Are there questions on the test varied in each section? This category was coded VQ (Y) with the (Y) standing for the answer we want: YES.

4) Are the questions themselves written in more difficult language than the passage? This category carried the code LMDQ (N) with the (N) standing for the answer we want: NO.

The table derived from this analysis looked like this for each test:

Table 4

*Sample Analytical Table for Question Evaluation*

Test	Passage	AWRP (N)	QAAP (Y)	VQ (Y)	LMDQ (N)

#### **4.4 Focus Group Analysis**

The most significant part of this study was the semi-structured interviews conducted in the form of focus groups. This method was chosen for its ability to dig ‘deep’ and get to the heart of matters (Grudens-Schuck, Lundy Allen, & Larson, 2004). The semi-structured interview’s flexibility was ideal for this project as it allowed the researcher to probe into areas of interest further to get to the core issues at hand. It also allowed for the use of stimulus material (ie. the IELTS readings in the examination) for discussion points.

**4.4.1 Subjects** Participation in the focus groups was limited to specific students in the Khalifa University Preparatory Programme, making the sampling purposive in nature. The sampling consisted of one main group all from the same sample: 21 Emirati students – both male and female- between the ages of 18 and 21 all studying level 2 of the English foundation programme. None of these students had any prior history of living or studying abroad for long periods of time.

This particular group was chosen because it represents the age and ethnic group of students who (in the past) had voiced experiences of bias on the test. It is this group that is “experiencing the phenomenon that is being explored” (Rudestam & Newton, 2007, p. 106).

The group of 21 was broken down into 5 separate focus groups consisting of around 3 to 5 students each. Each group sat a different reading component of the IELTS examination, which was immediately followed by a group interview.

**4.4.2 Instruments of Analysis** The process of abstraction was applied to the transcripts yielded by the focus group part of this study. According to Lawson, the process of abstraction is indispensable in all kinds of scientific and social research (1998). To abstract is essentially to focus on and isolate one aspect of a given phenomenon in order to know it better: “The point of abstraction is to individuate one or more aspects or components or attributes and their relationships in order to understand them better” (Lawson, 1998, p. 170).

The starting point of abstraction is always the concrete or the domain of the empirical. From there, we move to the deeper level of structures and mechanisms to

isolate a cause (Danermark et al., 2002). A cause, according to Bhaskar, can be best described as a “factor which, in the circumstances that actually prevailed, so tipped the balance of events as to produce the known outcome” (1979, p. 83).

In CR research, abduction and retroduction are the two main forms of abstraction used to access causal mechanisms (Danermark et al., 2002). Whereas some researchers see the terms as synonymous, others make a clear distinction between the two.

Abduction originated with an American philosopher by the name of Charles S. Peirce who felt deduction and induction were not always the most useful tools for analysis. Abduction is difficult to define but in essence it refers to a redescription or recontextualization of something in order to gain a greater understanding of it (Danermark et al., 2002). To recontextualize something means to “observe, describe, interpret and explain something within the frame of a new context” (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 91). This is not a new concept or skill. Abduction is used daily in some professions. Take detectives and doctors for example. Both these professions require a certain amount of creative reasoning to allow for the reconstruction of conditions and to come up with conclusions or diagnoses. There is one major difference between this type of abduction and the abduction we see in social research though. Whereas doctors and detectives can usually come up with a definitive answer to a question, the same cannot be said for researchers. Instead, abductive conclusions in social research tend to be *one* of many possible solutions (Danermark et al., 2002). Collier agrees stating that “a transcendental argument may account for the possibility of some phenomenon but there may be rival transcendental arguments to explain the same thing... one transcendental

argument may explain more than others, and so be the best available account” (Collier, 1994, p. 23)

Another challenge in the use of abduction is the difficulty of applying it correctly since the process takes a significant amount of skill to yield valid conclusions (Lawson, 1998). The same applies for the process of retroduction.

Retroduction answers the question “How is X possible?”. The goal is to try to establish what properties exist to make X possible. To do this, we start at the level of the empirical – with an observation- and then infer a mechanism that could explain the phenomenon: “The aim is not to cover a phenomenon under a generalisation...but to identify a factor responsible for it, that helped produce, or at least facilitated, it” (Lawson, 1998, p. 156).

The transcripts of the focus groups were first analyzed for common themes or sets of ideas. This was done through the identification and grouping of common words and phrases rather than a detailed linguistic analysis. These commonalities then underwent the process of retroduction with the resulting structures and mechanisms- of which some were discourses- placed into the following analytical chart:

<b>Empirical Experience</b>	The perception of cultural bias		
<b>Actual Event</b>	The question/topic on the examination		
<b>Real (Mechanisms and Structures)</b>	Structure	Culture	Agency

*Figure 13: Critical realist analytical chart*

The process of abduction was then employed to help explain the causal mechanisms isolated by the retroduction. This was done through the use of substantive theory.

**4.4.3 Procedures** The focus groups were formed from the IELTS classes being run by the Preparatory Programme at Khalifa University. All students in the classes were invited to join the research project. The details of the project along with its purpose were outlined orally at first and in writing as students signed up. The ethical clearance for this research was given by the Head of Research – Dr. Marianne Hassan- at the university. A detailed proposal of this research (including all matters related to ethics and consent) had been submitted to Dr. Hassan and her committee prior to the granting of her department's approval.

The students that were interested in joining the focus group, read and signed their consent forms (see Appendix A) and were taken to a different classroom. An information sheet (see Appendix B) was completed for each student and a number and letter was assigned for anonymous referencing. For example, the first group was labelled GROUP A. The various members of the group were called 1A, 2A, 3A etc.. A maximum number of 5 students were placed into one focus group. This group had one hour- as per the IELTS examination regulations- to read the three IELTS passages and answer the questions (every group was given a different examination). Once completed, the group came together for their semi-structured interviews with the researcher. General questions (see Appendix C) were asked about the examination as a whole eventually leading into content familiarity, topic familiarity, and question-type difficulty discussions using the actual examinations as stimuli. This is standard procedure for conducting focus groups as

discussions are “usually based on the use of a schedule of questions. This is sometimes followed by use of some kind of stimulus material.” (Silverman, 2011, p. 208).

All interviews were recorded and later transcribed using the anonymous coding system. Electronic and written files along with the anonymous coding system were stored on a password protected computer.

The transcripts (see Appendix D) were then taken and analyzed through the process of retroduction. Before this process could begin, as mentioned earlier, the transcripts were first analyzed for common themes or sets of ideas. After this, structural components were identified amongst these commonalities. Structures such as nationality, age, people, organizations, education, state, gender etc. as well as discourses were abstracted. These were divided further into possible causal mechanisms of structure, culture, or agency using the analytical chart described earlier in this chapter.

Following this, the process of abduction began. Various existing theory was compared, applied, and integrated to bring about a greater understanding of the phenomenon. In other words, the situation was ‘recontextualized’ through the use of existing knowledge and alternative theories leading to the identification of causal mechanisms along with reasons validating these choices.

#### **4.5 Multi-Method Approach Rationale**

Methodology and ontology are closely intertwined – with the latter feeding into the former by determining the ways in which a) research questions are formulated and b) the research is conducted. A distinction between quantitative and qualitative research

design is often applied as a result of this interplay of ontology and methodology even though, according to Bryman (2012), the status of such a distinction remains ambiguous at best.

This distinction, however, is useful for basic classification purposes as it serves to categorize methods of research into one of two areas. The quantitative research methods see reality as external and objective in nature with the main goal being to test theory. This usually refers to the positivist model in use with the natural sciences and often deals with numbers. Qualitative research, on the other hand, focuses on the generation of theories, not necessarily on the testing of them, although Silverman (2011) contends that a century of qualitative research has proved otherwise. Numbers, generally, are not as important as words, and social reality is viewed not as a constant objective fact but as a malleable entity.

When the distinction is rudimentarily laid out, as in the above case, it might be easy to assume that there is no common ground between the two - that in essence, they are two different 'armed camps' (Silverman, 2011, p. 25). However, methods employed by positivists can easily be combined with qualitative methods within a single research project and still hold water. The term for this combination is 'the multi-method approach' - one that was employed here in this study.

At first glance, such an approach may not appear suitable for a critical realist study. Yeung (1997), however, points out that a multi-method approach is advocated by many researchers including Brewer and Hunter (2006) as well as Brannen (2005):  
"Qualitative researchers also recognize the use of other more traditional sorts of

instrumentation provided they are grounded in the central focus of the research...”

(Rudestam & Newton, 2007, p. 109).

Moreover, a multi-method approach can be used specifically in CR studies because it tends to be guided by topics and contexts of studies rather than pure ontology. Sayer (2000) believes a range of methods is applicable to critical realist research as well, and even Bhaskar concedes empirical instruments are useful for identifying experiences such as the use of descriptive statistics to describe the level of the empirical (Bhaskar, 2008). This is because the empirical layer of reality can only be explored through the senses. Furthermore, as Danermark et al. (2002) cleverly point out, there is no ONE method for critical realism. There are, however, dominant methods used in CR research - with abstraction being a major contributor (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2011).

Another reason for using a multi-method approach was related to the concept of triangulation which counteracts claims of invalidity. The use of triangulation is necessary in CR research as a way to establish the validity and reliability of a study (Yeung, 1997). As long as the methods used are in line with the realist ontology, triangulation can firmly establish practical adequacy of causal mechanisms (Yeung, 1997). Since single-case studies such as this one are often criticized for their lack of validity, triangulation is needed to counteract such shortcomings (Zainal, 2007). Tellis (1997) also confirms the need for triangulation stating it is an ethical necessity with regards to establishing validity. Consequently, this research employed a multi-method approach. This type of approach is heralded by Richardson (2000) as well even though she makes an effort to

expand the rigid concept of triangulation to a more flexible, multifaceted approach she coins crystallization. The image of a crystal, rather than a triangle, allows for

...an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach... crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know there is always more to know. (2000, p. 934)

Unfortunately, the approach of triangulation does not in-and-of itself *automatically* render this case study on the experiences of IELTS candidates from the UAE valid and reliable, but it does contribute to greater depth of understanding. Triangulation was therefore applied wherever possible to the individual areas as well - for example, to the cultural content analysis. For this content analysis part of the research, which allows for a greater amount of subjectivity in its categorization placement, three instructors with similar qualifications and a variety of teaching backgrounds were tasked with reviewing the subjective parts of the analysis identified by the researcher. This included a review of anything to do with the cultural objects, social roles, and belief systems identified in the readings. If any of the subjective parts were questioned, they were discussed and either confirmed or discarded from the results list at the discretion of the researcher. This type of triangulation is not uncommon: "Many qualitative researchers make use of peers or colleagues to play the role of devil's advocate..." (Rudestam & Newton, 2007, p. 115).

Of the different types of validity – measurement/construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability – the most prevalent one usually called into question is that of external validity (Bryman, 2012). External validity refers to the ability to generalize one’s findings to the greater population. To counteract this concern, one need only point out that this particular case study was not designed for such a purpose to begin with. In fact, critical realist studies are not intended to generalize at all – a point already discussed earlier. Thus external validity should not be a major concern in this study since the research is meant to serve as an in-depth ‘snapshot’ of a given phenomenon – nothing more. It is meant to give an intensive examination of the phenomenon at hand.

The thesis now moves on to look at the results of the study in greater detail. Chapter 5 outlines the results of the content analysis and Chapter 6 details the results of the focus group study.

## Chapter 5

### Results and Discussions: Part 1

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter will begin by looking at the results of the quantitative analyses of the study – both the content analysis and question analysis - which translate into events at the level of the actual. These events emerge from the realm of the real and lead to the experiences observed at the level of the empirical. In order to better understand the generative mechanisms at play that bring about this emergence, the experiences and the events undergo the processes of retroduction and abduction in this chapter and are placed into the Bhaskar/Archer framework outlined in the methodology chapter. The focus group results will undergo a separate analysis in Chapter 6.

#### 5.2a Content Analysis

**5.2.1(a) Results and Discussion** The content analysis revealed a significant number of cultural references which could lead to the emergence of experiences of cultural bias at the level of the empirical. A quantitative summary of the results – which, as I have indicated, need to be conceptualized as events at the level of the actual in a critical realist framework - is below with detailed findings available in Appendix E. The results are rounded off by a separate geographical analysis of the places mentioned in the readings – more events at the level of the actual (see Appendix F). It is important to remember that the analysis for the cultural references were for *existence* not frequency and the geographical references for *frequency*.

Table 5

*Cultural Content Analysis Results*

<b>Test</b>	<b>CO</b>	<b>CT</b>	<b>PH</b>	<b>PE</b>	<b>SR</b>	<b>BS</b>	<b>Total</b>
BK 2-1	3	0	1	1	0	0	5
BK 2-2	1	0	3	1	1	0	6
BK 2-3	6	0	5	2	2	1	16
BK 2-4	5	0	3	4	5	2	19
BK 3-1	5	0	5	1	0	0	11
BK 3-2	7	0	6	0	2	0	15
BK 3-3	10	0	4	0	0	1	15
BK 3-4	3	0	7	1	1	0	12
BK 4-1	7	0	1	0	1	2	11
BK 4-2	3	0	3	4	3	1	14
BK 4-3	9	0	5	0	0	1	15
BK 4-4	5	0	5	1	1	1	13
BK 6-1	8	0	4	1	1	0	14
BK 6-2	6	0	6	0	0	1	13
BK 6-3	7	0	2	0	0	2	11
BK 6-4	2	0	4	0	2	1	9
BK 7-1	9	0	4	2	1	1	17
BK 7-2	14	0	6	0	2	0	22
BK 7-3	10	0	4	2	0	2	18
BK 7-4	8	0	6	1	0	1	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>272</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>6.4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>1.05</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>0.85</b>	<b>13.6</b>

CO = cultural objects    CT = customs and traditions    PH = political and historical

PE = proverbs and idiomatic expressions    SR = social roles    BS = beliefs or superstitions

The data reveals the highest number of cultural references or events in the actual occur in the CO category, referring to cultural objects, products or things. On average, 6.4 references were made in relation to culturally laden things in one test (comprised of three reading passages). A reference was noted regardless of whether the author gave an explanation of the item, idea, or product or even whether it played a significant role in the reading. What was being counted was the ‘mention’ of the reference.

The analysis disclosed a wide variety of CO references ranging from the obvious to the debateable. Obvious examples – translating into events in the realm of the actual- were mentions of the Holy Grail, manioc, Frankenstein, Agatha Christie, and igloos. Less clearly defined items included on the list - which may not be familiar to the particular students in this study - were such things as monsoons, typhoons, and bush flies. The reasons for this unfamiliarity can be retroducted back to the domains of structure and culture in the realm of the real. Students’ lack of world knowledge stems from both the UAE’s educational system and a discourse which I have termed the ‘Unimportance of the un-Islamic’. The educational curriculum in the government schools in the UAE offer very limited subject matters for study. Ridge (2011) reports that mathematics, science, Arabic, English, and Islamic Studies are the most commonly taught subjects in government high schools. Other avenues that build world knowledge, like reading and watching television, tend not to be utilized appropriately by students. With little to no reading culture in the UAE (Trade Arabia, 2013) and television viewing focused mainly on popular series rather than documentaries or educational shows (Arab Advisors Group, 2011), students have limited knowledge of the world outside the region. This is exacerbated by the

discourse of the ‘Unimportance of the un-Islamic’ emerging from the domain of culture at the level of the real. This discourse discourages learning about things outside of the students’ circle of knowledge if it is related to other religions or ways of life. One of the students confirmed the existence of this discourse in the focus group study, identifying anything related to a religion other than Islam as unfamiliar and of no interest to them.

Notice her use of the pronoun ‘we’:

3A: Because ...I think from reading it is related to something religious and these kinds of things and ... uhh.. for me I am not so... ok I know things about Japan but I don’t know things the religion in east Asia...

M: But why is that? Is it...

3A: It’s not something we are interested in knowing about.

M: Was it something you studied in school or no?

(Mix): No..no...no

Second on the list of the most frequent cultural references was the category of PH or political terms and/or historical settings, sitting at 4.2 references per examination.

Whereas the settings are addressed again in a separate geographical analysis, the political terms were only addressed once in this research. Again, the analysis was conducted from two perspectives – that of our students and that of other international students. From the perspective of our students, things like a democratic society, a political lobby, and a march were all culturally unfamiliar events at the level of the actual. Political campaigns and referendums fall into this category as well. The reason for this lies in the domain of

structure in the realm of the real. The UAE is not a democratic society so features related to such a society – like a referendum for example – are not part of the citizens’ normal experiences. With respect to the mentioning of historical times and places, various examples abound in the readings – including mentions of 1946 Britain and Mexico 10 years ago – events in the actual that students have no knowledge of as well.

Other categories do not hold as many references as the CO and the PH ones do. Social structures and roles, the SR category, fell into third place with only 1.1 references per examination. References here included concepts such as an entire community participating in the construction of a road and a reference to normal class time as being 40 minutes. The concept of women in power (women executives) and doctors as highly-respected individuals also made the list. These events bring forth the emergence of students’ perceptions of bias but the mechanisms that cause the emergence actually lie in the realm of the real. In the case of our students, these mechanisms relate to various structures and discourses found in UAE society. Take the community road building project as an example. In UAE society, largely unqualified low paid workers are brought in from impoverished countries to build the infrastructure of the country (Heard-Bey, 2004). An Emirati partaking in the physical building of a road is deemed beneath his social status.

Even the concept of doctors being powerful members of society that are highly respected is debateable. In the UAE, doctors who have trained in less developed countries do not hold the same status as doctors trained in the West. In fact, unsubstantiated reports have claimed that pay differs according to one’s nationality, something I was privy to in

the education field as well. This is unofficially substantiated through reports in the media with one particular article in *The National* clearly admitting that the salary of a doctor is tied to his/her nationality among other things (Ismail, 2012).

Although the educational status of women is seeing a clear rise in the UAE, women are still under-represented in high profile positions in the government with statistics showing only 30% of the high profile government positions taken up by Emirati women (UAE Interact, 2013). Despite government efforts to empower the women of the UAE, there remains a discourse which I would term the 'Importance of Women Staying at Home'. This discourse is largely unspoken but women are expected to bear children shortly after marriage, making the decision to go back to work a difficult one (Rashad, Osman, & Rhoudi-Fahimi, 2005). This discourse is thus evidenced through social practices.

With regards to the reference of class timing, the UAE does not have 40 minute lessons. This falls in the category of 'structure' in the realm of the real in the Bhaskar/Archer framework. In the past 10 years of teaching in the UAE, I have never come across a 40 minute lesson. Single lessons have always been 50 minutes in length. While it could be argued that students could extrapolate from their own context that other lessons last 40 minutes, it must be taken into account that dominant discourses privilege the practice of the local context (with expatriates forced to fit in without protest) and that students' lack of experience of other contexts can make it very difficult for them to envisage anything other than what they know.

The category of PE, or proverbs and idiomatic expressions, has fewer references than SR at 1.05 per examination. Although these cultural references were not as common as the other three mentioned, there were still some significant examples to draw from. Expressions like ‘canary in a mine’, ‘armchair green’, and ‘gone off the boil’ fell into this category. Gone off the boil is a particularly interesting expression. When first identified, I asked other colleagues if they had ever heard of the expression. No one said they had although they could guess what it meant. This prompted me to look up the meaning. My best guess was that it was similar to the expression ‘to go off the deep end’, referring to someone losing emotional control. This assumption was incorrect. It turns out the expression is British in origin and means ‘to become less urgent in nature’, referring to taking something off the stove when it is boiling and putting it on the backburner.

Other interesting expressions unfamiliar to me (a fluent English speaker who grew up in Canada) include ‘to chalk up the pavement’ and ‘to see through a darker glass’. A more familiar expression found in the readings - ‘to go through the roof’ – actually has two meanings: to become really upset and express it or to have a sharp increase in cost. When students are faced with these ‘events’ on the examination, their experience of unfamiliarity can be traced back to the domains of structure and culture in the level of the real. For example, the discourse of the ‘Unimportance of Reading’ – addressed in greater detail in Chapter 6 – explains the students’ lack of encounters with different kinds of idiomatic expressions. Students come from a largely oral culture (Swan & Ahmed, 2011) which relegates reading into a lower status. The students’ level of

language and knowledge of vocabulary, on the other hand, can be traced back to their education system – found in the structural domain in the real.

The second last category of cultural capital<sup>1</sup> needed to engage with test items is that of beliefs and superstitions, labelled BS. This category is discursively constituted since it is made up of ‘sets of ideas’ held by a group of people and falls into the domain of culture at the level of the real. It was stretched to include concepts that question or perhaps even insult the belief system of our students in the UAE. These include references in the readings that refer to mammals as our ancestors and ants being similar to humans in intelligence. Connecting words such as ‘mammal’ with ‘ancestor’ does not work in Islamic societies since Islam does not align with Darwin’s theory of evolution. Religion falls into the domain of structure in the level of the real with religious beliefs constituting a cultural discourse and falling into the domain of culture– both acting as mechanisms that allow for the emergence of the experience of bias to occur at the level of the empirical. The connection between mammal and ancestor does not exist in Islamic societies as it does in western societies. A word, according to Saussure (Benveniste, 1971), is not a fixed entity and can be divided into two parts – the signifier and the signified. The signifier relates to the shape of the word or its form. The signified refers to the concept of the word. This means that the meaning of a word is arbitrary and constructed socially by a group of people who speak the same language (Benveniste, 1971). This group of people have been programmed to evoke the same meaning of the

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘cultural capital’ was originally defined by Bourdieu as assets which act as ‘a social relation within a system of exchange that includes accumulated cultural knowledge that confers powers and status’ (Barker, 2004, p. 37). In a Bhaskarian framework, cultural capital would be located at the level of the real.

word. This means that words (consisting of both signifiers and the signified) are a product of the social interaction of a given society. Since no one society is identical to another, it stands to reason that people from different cultures and societies experience words and connections between words –like mammal and ancestor - in different ways at the level of the empirical. With strong Islamic belief permeating all aspects of our students' lives, any references contrary to their belief system are problematic. To illustrate this further, the topic of evolution is so unwelcome at the university that a movie about Darwin and his scientific discoveries was 'confiscated' off the shelves of the learning centre. The mere idea that humans and animals share a genetic history and a level of intelligence is not only unfamiliar to students but also extremely offensive.

Peace and quiet –concepts referred to on the examination- also hold different meanings and value in the UAE than in the West. Noise, here, is everywhere. Since most families live together under one roof, the noise of children and human activity is familiar to them and therefore welcomed. To be alone is not something desirable. To illustrate this point, I would like to share a personal experience. I value peace and quiet a great deal and so go to the movies as early as possible to avoid the crowds – which is usually 10 am here. One day, I settled into my seat and was pleased that I was the only person in the theatre. Then two local women walked into the theatre, looked around, and sat right beside me. I could not fathom what would make them choose the two seats right next to me when there were hundreds available in the theatre. Irritated, I got up and moved to another seat. After the movie, I called my local girlfriend and asked her to explain their behaviour. She reported that in her culture it is very sad to be alone and the women felt

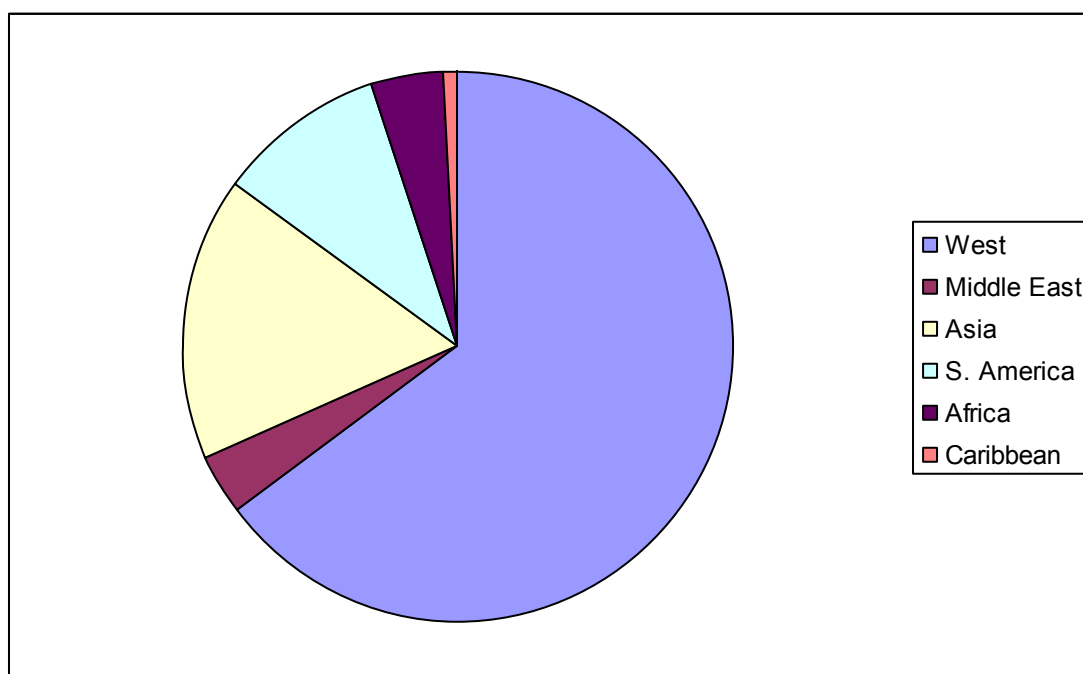
sorry for me. They just wanted me to feel better. Regardless of whether the explanation given by my girlfriend was correct, it is evidence of a discourse privileging contact and communal living. When activated at the level of the real through the instantiation of content schemata (Carrell, 1988), it is possible to see how non-understanding can be experienced at the level of the real and, thus, cultural bias.

The only category in which no references were found was the customs and traditions category, labelled CT. Out of all of the readings, no mention of a single tradition, festival, or custom was made.

To sum up, then, this study found that on average one IELTS examination has close to 6 references related to cultural things, 4 references related to political terms or historical settings, 1 reference to social roles, 1 reference to beliefs, and 1 idiomatic expression for a total of 13.6 cultural references per examination. This translates into close to 14 events at the level of the actual that students face in one sitting of the examination. This number only pertains to the reading component of the examination with cultural references just as likely in the listening, speaking, and writing components. Regardless of how much the examination may hold in total, the reading component alone clearly exhibits enough potential for students to experience bias at the level of the empirical.

It is important to note that this number does not take into account the many references made to places in the world other than where our students live. For the geographical analysis, the following eight regions of the world were identified as categories: the West (includes English speaking North America, Europe, Australia, and

New Zealand), the Middle East, Asia, South America, Africa, and the Caribbean. The results can be summarized as follows: the West had 90 references, the Middle East had 5 references, Asia had 23 references, South America had 14 references, Africa had 6 references, and the Caribbean had 1 reference. These references act as events in the realm of the actual.



*Figure 14:* Pie chart for geographical locations

Figure 14 puts the references into perspective. The majority of the geographical mentions are of the West at 90/139 - references which comprise 65% of the total. References of places in Asia stand at 23/139 making up 17% of all locations mentioned. The next highest category is South America, with 14/139 references equalling 10% of the total. Africa stands at 6/139 translating into 4% with the Middle East and the Caribbean trailing behind at 5/139 or 4% and 1/139 or 1% respectively.

Students sitting the examination in the UAE would be most familiar with their own region as very little world knowledge is taught in schools (see earlier discussion) and few students have travelled outside the Muslim world. Media reports confirm this with the leaders of the nation encouraging the youth of today to travel and study abroad to become world citizens (Al Subaihi, 2013).

According to the data, only 4% of the places mentioned in the readings would relate to any place that UAE students would naturally have a little more knowledge of due to their own geographical location. It is understandable, then, - with most of the references (events in the actual) relating to Europe, Canada, the US, Australia, and New Zealand – if students sitting the examination in the UAE expressed feelings of bias at the level of the empirical.

## **5.2b Syntactical Analysis**

**5.2.1(b) Results and Discussion** Given that a text's propositional density (P-density) may affect how difficult it is for someone to answer a question (Kintsch 1998; Kintsch & Keenan, 1973), a syntactical analysis of the five examinations that the students sat in this study was conducted. This syntactical analysis focused on the number of complex sentence structures found in the readings as well as the frequency of passive voice use. The sentence structure students engaged with during the examination served as events at the level of the actual. The difficulty perceived at the level of the empirical emerges from these events and from the knowledge structure of the language students draw from in the structural domain at the level of the real.

The analysis found that on average 92 clauses/reduced clauses and 50 instances of passive voice were used on one full test. This varied somewhat from one examination to another but each test ranged between 86-96 clauses/reduced clauses and 35 – 61 passive voice. Since complex structures are an integral part of a text's propositional density, this finding indicates that the IELTS examinations have a high level of P-density. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this equates to a greater amount of text processing on behalf of the reader. Shiotsu (2003) looked at the impact of syntactic knowledge on reading test performance versus that of lexical knowledge and found it played a more significant role. Berman (1984), in an earlier study, had already established the notion that heavy sentence structure impeded the reader's ability to process a text efficiently. For students in this study who have little experience with reading- studies indicate only 22% of Emiratis are readers (Al Yacoub, 2012) - and who are unfamiliar with dense texts as a result, the syntactic difficulty of the texts encountered on the examination (an event in the actual) allows for the emergence of the experience of bias at the level of the empirical. The mechanisms responsible at the level of the real for this are numerous. In the domain of structure, home, school, Islam and the literacy practice of recitation all play a significant role in the emergence (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion). The domain of culture also plays a role since students' reading habits have been discursively constructed by the idea that reading is not important.

The analysis also found that there was no consistent pattern to the use of either complex structure or passive voice. Not only did the numbers vary from examination to examination, but they also varied from passage to passage within each examination. This

means that the event of sitting the examination (at the level of the actual) allows for a different experience every time the student sits it. In my experience, our students tend to sit the examination many times before they get their band 6 for university entry. The IELTS examination, however, was never intended for this use. It was meant to assess students' readiness to engage with academic study in the English language at institutions in English speaking countries around the world.

Table 6

*Syntactical Analysis Results*

<b>Book 3 Test 2</b>	<b>Clauses/Reduced Clauses</b>	<b>Passive Voice</b>
Passage 1	30	10
Passage 2	27	11
Passage 3	29	14

<b>Book 3 Test 4</b>	<b>Clauses/Reduced Clauses</b>	<b>Passive Voice</b>
Passage 1	32	10
Passage 2	30	11
Passage 3	32	28

<b>Book 4 Test 3</b>	<b>Clauses/Reduced Clauses</b>	<b>Passive Voice</b>
Passage 1	22	16
Passage 2	36	7
Passage 3	31	25

<b>Book 7 Test 2</b>	<b>Clauses/Reduced Clauses</b>	<b>Passive Voice</b>
Passage 1	33	25
Passage 2	27	7
Passage 3	36	29

<b>Book 7 Test 3</b>	<b>Clauses/Reduced Clauses</b>	<b>Passive Voice</b>
Passage 1	42	22
Passage 2	27	17
Passage 3	26	20

### 5.3 Question Analysis Results

**5.3.1 Introduction** This analysis occurred in two different forms. One analysis looked at the question types and forms while the other took the shape of an evaluation of the questions. Both are important to analyze since they constitute the events at the level of the actual with which students engage.

**5.3.2 Results and Discussion** The question analysis found that on average, an IELTS reading examination asked *reorganization* or *reinterpretation* questions more than *literal* questions but not by a substantial amount. The data showed an almost equal amount of questions of each type with 20.13 *reorganization/rethinking* and 18.8 *literal* questions. The rest of the examination questions were either *inference* or *evaluative* in nature but with minimal representation. The form most commonly asked on the test was the RAM or *rethinking/alternative/matching* form which stood at 9.8 questions, on average, per examination. This question type and form is used in the matching of the headlines or titles to the paragraphs sections. There were some LAM or *literal/alternative/matching* questions on the examinations as well, but not as many, with only 1.2 on average per examination. This brings the overall average of the *matching* type question, though, to the highest question type used on the examination – to 11. This translates into 11 questions on every IELTS reading examination relating to some sort of matching activity- most commonly matching the main idea or headline to a paragraph. This activity equates to an event at the level of the actual. With students used to being tested for literal understanding in the form of standardized tests – where students are often asked to memorize chunks of textbooks (Ridge, 2011) – as opposed to more global understandings steeped in higher order thinking, it is understandable that they express feelings of confusion or discomfort at the level of the empirical. The high school assessment system – located in the domain of structure at the level of the real – therefore acts as a generative mechanism that allows for the emergence of the students’ feelings at the level of the empirical.

The other heavily represented question type was that of *fill in the blanks*, coming in at an overall average of 10.9. This question type appeared as *literal* or *rethinking* as well, reflecting 4.6 and 6.3 of the questions respectively, thereby making RAFB questions the second most common question on the examination.

In third position are the YN (or *Yes/No*) questions with an overall average of 6.33 with 5.5 of those being LYN (*literal*) in nature. The LYN question appeared in third place of most commonly asked questions while *multiple choice* questions were on the lower end of the scale with only 4 MC on a reading examination on average – 2.5 of them being *literal* and 1.5 *rethinking*.

Table 7

*Question Analysis Results*

	<b>LYN</b>	<b>LTF</b>	<b>LWH</b>	<b>LMC</b>	<b>LAFB</b>	<b>LAS</b>	<b>LAM</b>	<b>LAC</b>	<b>LAL</b>	<b>LSA</b>
<b>Bk 3-2</b>	10	0	0	2	9	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Bk 3-4</b>	10	0	0	7	9	0	3	0	0	0
<b>Bk 4-3</b>	2	0	4	3	8	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Bk 6-1</b>	0	5	2	0	0	0	0	4	0	0
<b>Bk 7-3</b>	0	13	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0
<b>Bk 7-2</b>	11	0	0	3	0	0	4	0	0	0
<b>AVG</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>



	<b>EYN</b>	<b>ETF</b>	<b>EWH</b>	<b>EMC</b>	<b>EAFB</b>	<b>EAS</b>	<b>EAM</b>	<b>EAC</b>	<b>EAL</b>	<b>ESA</b>
<b>Bk 3-2</b>	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Bk 3-4</b>	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Bk 4-3</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Bk 6-1</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Bk 7-3</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Bk 7-2</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
<b>AVG</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.33</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.17</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

These findings only partially match those of a similar study done by Moore, Morton, and Price (2012). Both this study and Moore et al.'s found *'matching'* to be the number one question type on the examination (if you combine summary match and info-category match in the latter study). Whereas this study found *fill in the blank* to be the second most commonly used question type, Moore et al.'s study gave that designation to *true/false/not given* questions and third place to *fill in the blanks*. So positions two and three were reversed in the studies. This could be due to the different categorization system Moore et al. (2012) used in their study with an additional category of 'other' perhaps affecting the results.

This data reveals that about half of the questions on every IELTS reading examination – due to the category placement of *rethinking* - ask students to reorganize and reinterpret the text, thereby asking them to apply a form of higher order thinking and different literacy practices, albeit not as intensive as *inference* and *evaluative* questions.

Nonetheless, this may cause the experience of bias at the level of the empirical if the students' educational system required very little of this sort of activity in the past. This is supported by studies (see Kunnan, 1990; Ryan & Bachmann, 1992) that found that instructional practices (structures in the level of the real) had a significant effect on performance in standardized tests. Ridge (2011) confirms that this is indeed the case for Emirati students attending public schools in the UAE: "Currently, in the UAE, Ministry of Education exams are based for the most part on memorizing content rather than on understanding and applying skills" (p. 73). With a highly standardized curriculum, the examinations test for "particular information that students are supposed to have memorized..." (p. 71). Reynolds (1998) would label this as bias in content validity since at least half of the question types and tasks found on the reading test would be more difficult for this cultural group (due to lack of exposure) than a group stemming from a different educational background – one that trained students in literacy practices related to critical thinking (a European system for example). Hoyt (1999) reinforces the importance of the role exposure plays in the building of text familiarity. This all aligns with Street's (1993) argument that standardized testing tends to privilege a chosen few.

A closer look at the focus group transcripts is now warranted to see if students themselves voiced difficulty with any of these question types.

**Matching Questions** Some members in Group A voiced concern over *matching* activities, stating that they found them more difficult than other question types because of the complexity involved and the time needed to answer them (for more confirmation see full transcripts in Appendix D). Note that the letter M stands for moderator.

### Group A Excerpts

M: Ok...choose the letter. Tell me about why you didn't answer that one.

What was... Was it difficult? Is that what you are saying?

2A: I think, I did..I read.. the passage, I get the idea but it wasn't organized well in my mind so I couldn't figure which ..which one for which paragraph.

1A: That's hard...The hardest question in the last passage with...with no more time for you to think about it...you will freak out.

M: So...umm... are you saying that the...that type of question is more difficult than the other questions?

(in unison): Yup...yes...sure

5A: Yeah.. because it take lots...

1A: Not more difficult but it takes time to understand every paragraph and to put the right heading for it.

From the excerpts, one can see that students in Group A felt the matching questions were challenging and time-consuming. This observation is located at the level of the empirical. The matching questions are the events in the actual. The mechanisms that generate these feelings can be retroducted back to the domain of structure at the level of the real to the students' education system and their experience with assessment. As mentioned earlier in this discussion, Ridge (2011) confirms that the students' prior assessment experiences were different in nature.

Group B expressed similar sentiments but indicated stronger emotions at the level of the empirical. The excerpts below highlight emotions of fear and hatred at the sight of the matching-type questions (events at the level of the actual). Again these feelings emerged due to the students' lack of experience with this question type in their past assessment practices – a mechanism which is part of the structural domain in the level of the real.

### **Group B Excerpts**

2B: I am afraid about this question

7B: That's why I hate it.

3B: I don't like this question...

Group C had quite a lengthy discussion about *matching* exercises, highlighting their mixed emotions (see Appendix D for further details). Some students expressed confusion at the matching questions that focused on a graph while others found the graph helped guide them to the answers. Some students found that more support was given to the question through the use of a graph, indicating that they had had some experience with graph-completion questions or questions with some form of support in the past. Again, the graph-like matching question was the event at the level of the actual from which the experiences at the level of the empirical emerged. Once again, the mechanism that triggered this emergence at the level of the real was the structure of the students' past educational experience.

**Group C Excerpts**

- 4C: I found this question more confusing than the other questions...
- 1C: I think the examiners try to trick the...uhhh..uhh... trick the students to confuse them in the.. in the exam...I think it's the hardest question on the IELTS...
- 2C: And ...like..if you want..like.. solve it, you need...like..uh... various types of technologic..uh...  
various types of ...like solvents.... like first of all..
- M: But... it's a matching exercise... you are not given the headings... you have to match it to the resolutions listen in the actual reading. Easy? Hard?
- 3C: Hard.
- 4C: This one was easy.
- 5C: ...medium..
- 1C: I think it's easy because we have to look at the graph
- 2C: Just a little bit hard.

Some members of Group D felt unfamiliar question types –like the matching one on their examination which had to do with cities and numbers- were confusing. Others were fine with the question because the chart format gave enough support to the question. These experiences align with the experiences of Group C.

### Group D Excerpts

M: Tell me what was confusing when you were doing it.

5D: Just the organizations...uhh... it's like... uhh.. where to put the numbers and what to write...

M: OK...so you have numbers and...cities to write.. so you didn't'...quite understand how to do the activity? Is that what you're saying?

5D: Yes.

M: OK... ladies... did you have a challenge with the way this question is set up? Questions 1-5? The matching...

1D: No

3D: No

1D: Because of the charts, it was easy... easier

Group E felt the difficulty of the task of *matching* was in part due to the length of the paragraphs in the passage. This observation at the level of the empirical can be retroducted back to the realm of culture at the level of the real. The cultural discourse of the 'Unimportance of Reading' (mentioned earlier in this discussion) has left the students with few reading experiences to draw from, let alone reading experiences of any length. The structure of religion also plays a role in the emergence of this experience at the empirical. With the majority of the students' reading experiences linked to the Holy Quran, they are used to shorter, less time-consuming passages in their reading practices (something discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6).

**Group E Excerpts**

1E: Sometimes the ... uh... paragraph is too long so you can't find the main heading to it. So maybe it's suitable to two or more headings..it's uh...

4E: Uh.. confusing... you mean? Uh... this...uh.. the article ...sometimes the paragraph is too long... and ..uh..

1E: It's not easy...it's about trick because this whole paragraph is about 10 or 20 lines. They took only 1 sentence and put it here so you need to read it all and understand.

The excerpts from Groups A-E regarding the *matching* questions on the reading examination reveal repetitive notions of confusion, complexity, and intentional trickiness.

1C: I think the examiners try to trick the students to confuse them

3C: tricky

5D: confuse us

2D: confusing

1E: so we confused...it's about trick

4E: confusing, you mean

2B: It's difficult to figure out which one

4C: I found this question more confusing than the others

This links in with their comments about it being a time-consuming task as well. The most telling comments about how the students generally feel about this type of question, however, are those that show the intensity of their feelings:

1A: you will freak out

2B: I am afraid about this question

7B: That's why I hate it

1C: heading gives headache

To put this into further perspective, students may have these experiences at the level of the empirical on one quarter of the reading component since that is the percentage of *matching* questions (events in the actual) found on an average reading examination.

This brings us to the next most prevalent question asked on the examination: the *fill in the blank*.

**Fill in the Blank** Overall, members in Group A and Group B expressed concern with the *summary-type fill in the blank* activity but felt a greater level of comfort when charts or tables were present due to the extra structure given to the task (see Appendix D for full transcripts). This same notion of 'extra structure' in the form of a graph was noted in the *matching* question section as well. The transcripts show, however, that not all students felt the same way. Their experiences at the level of the empirical differ. This difference in opinion can be explained at the level of the real where students draw on the

structure of their educational background. Some students felt comfortable with the extra support given by way of chart or table, while others did not find it helpful and let the number of choices distract them. In their educational system (structure in the realm of the real), students were given a great deal of support in assessment – to the point of being given the exact questions on the examination by being given chunks of texts to memorize (Ridge, 2011).

### **Group A and B Excerpts**

1A: I guess the hardest one was from 22-26

5A: Yeah, the summary..

4B: They give the example...like in front... and after that... when I see chart and the example inside and all this, I can answer all questions from 9 to number 13.

M: I see. So the example helps you?

4B: Yeah

3B: I think it was so easy .. Because..uh..I (unclear)... an example. So we can find the question in the number graph... the answers.

M: What do you think of this?

7B: Again, easy.

M: You thought it was easy? Why? What..what made it easy?

7B: Maybe the examples are the... like the things that you choo... ah... choose

M: Ok. Because they have a chart there already?

7B: Yeah

- M: ... with some examples?
- 7B: It's easier to get the...the answer from the...topic.
- 4B: I don't think so.
- M: You don't think so?
- 4B: No.. because we have a choice here so it was difficult for me.
- M: So... the fact that ... you had.... How many choices did you have?
- 2B: And its make difficult... Because we must choose 4 and we have 3 so it's a chance to get something wrong. Not correct.

Group C concurred with Group A and B's evaluation of the *fill in the blank* questions, stating if there were more structure in the exercise, like numbers or graphs, it would help them complete it. Again, it appears from the transcripts that the more structure students are given in questions, the easier it is (for most) to complete (See Appendix D for details). Group E expressed this sentiment as well. Group D expressed mixed emotions on this type of question, teetering between the question type being easy and difficult.

#### **Group D Excerpts**

- 2D: It was easy... and I found the answers directly.
- 1D: I found the answer but it took a bit of time.
- 5D: The first time... we were lost
- 4D: I agree with that .. I took a long time.

- 3D: It was easy.
- 2D: I missed two.
- 4D: I missed a lot of them.

The transcripts from Groups A-E regarding the *fill in the blank* questions on the reading examination show some consistent comments – mainly that the *fill in the blank* activity (in the form of a summary without any structure to assist the students) appears to be challenging to them. Once more structure was given to the question, however, students found it more manageable. The difficulty level of the *fill in the blank* question, then, is determined, according to students, on how much support the question is given. For example, the first question on the following page (taken from Cambridge English IELTS 9, Test 4, Passage 2, p. 95) would be a challenge whereas the second one (example taken from: [www.ielts-exam.net](http://www.ielts-exam.net)) would not:

Complete the summary below.

Choose ONE WORD ONLY from the passage for each answer.

**How children acquire a sense of identity**

First, children come to realize that they can have an effect on the world around them, for example by handling objects, or causing the image to move when they face a

24..... . This aspect of self-awareness is difficult to research directly, because of 25..... problems.

Complete the table below using information from the reading passage. Write no more than three words for each answer. Write your answers in boxes 1-8 on your answer sheet.

<b>Problem</b>	<b>Cause of the problem</b>	<b>Regulated after disaster? (Write Yes, No or Doesn't say)</b>
Position of icebergs not plotted	... (1) ... scattered all over the ship	Doesn't say
Insufficient lifeboats	... (2) ... regulations	... (3) ...
	a) ignorance of the extent of the danger	... (4) ...
Lifeboats not full	b) fear that the lifeboats would ... (5) ...	... (6) ...
Californian didn't listen to distress calls	No ... (7) ... wireless operation	... (8) ...

**Yes/No Questions** This type of question generated a great deal of discussion in the focus groups. Group A shared mixed emotions about this type of question, with some students saying it was easy and others saying the difficulty depended on the passage itself. The majority of the confusion at the level of the empirical, however, appears to arise from the use of no and not-given questions. The reason for this confusion can be traced back to the students' educational structure once again in the realm of the real. This type of question needs the use of literacy practices related to higher order thinking -

which most students do not possess thanks to the structure of their earlier education (Ridge, 2011).

### **Group A Excerpts**

M: Yes/No/Not-given.... Do you have any challenges with finding the yeses and the nos and the not-givens... are you... of those 3 is any one of those difficult for you?

1A: I guess, we ..we understand maybe the difference between the yes and the no and the not-given. .

5A: I think no and not given.. no and not-given... it..they are more similar because I can't distinguish between

3A: Sometimes on the examination they confuse us..and they bring something.... It's ...it's something related to something in the passage and sometimes you get confused whether it's no or not giving and sometimes and ..you say not giving and it's actually no because of some .. of a small word that is the key word..

Group B did not encounter these questions as much as group A in the examination. The events that they did face at the level of the actual, however, were experienced as easy at the level of the empirical as long as the passage itself was not too difficult. As mentioned earlier, long and dense passages are not something the students are familiar with due to their educational background (structure at the level of the real) and lack of reading culture (discursively constituted at the level of the real).

**Group B Excerpts**

7B: They weren't hard to locate..

M: They were not?

7B: No. The answers were easy, I guess.

2B: Yes. It's very easy...For this passage...

M: For this passage, it's easy?

(mix of ladies) Yes. Yes.

M: But generally speaking... do you find them easy?

4B: Yes...easy... sometimes

Group C expressed a mix of Group A and Group B experiences at the level of the empirical. Overall, they found the questions or events at the actual to be tricky especially if the passage was filled with synonyms and the answer was between *no* and *not-given*. Their concern with the synonyms indicates a lack of vocabulary which can be attributed at the level of the real to two things. Firstly, the students clearly did not receive enough vocabulary instruction at school to allow them to deal with the level and variety of lexis on the IELTS examination. This falls under the domain of structure at the level of the real. Secondly, due to the discourse of the 'Unimportance of Reading' (see earlier discussion), students did not gain vocabulary through extensive reading practice either, something which has been proven to promote all forms of language development including vocabulary building (Krashen, 2004).

**Group C Excerpts**

M: Yes? Ok. So let's move on to the first questions – questions 1 to 6. Those are literal true and false questions. Ok... that's what I have labeled them as. How did you feel about these questions?

5C: (unclear) was tricky.

4C: Yeah.

M: Some of these were tricky?

Mix: Yeah (mumbling from various people)

M: Ok. Overall, did you have trouble with either one or either of the three – true, false, not-given- or are they relatively difficult on the same level?

1C: No.... I usually have trouble with not-given.

M: Not-given?

Mix: Yes. Yeah.

M: You all do?

3C: Yes.

M: Well, tell me why- why you think that.

1C: Because, we don't know if we have to put it false or not-given, sometimes it is given but in synonym so we skip.... skip the part of the sentence...now we don't know where is the sentence.

M: So, sometimes it is in a synonym form...and you don't recognize it?

Mix: Yeah, yes.

3C: It's tricky sometimes.

Groups D and E confirmed the experiences of Groups A-C at the level of the empirical as well, reiterating feelings of difficulty between a *no* and *not-given* answer, with some students claiming this question type was the most difficult on the examination.

### **Groups D and E Excerpts**

M: Yes... Did you find that an easy task or uh... how difficult..?

3D: little confused...

M: Confusing?

1D: For me, it is – yes or no question – is the most difficult part..

1D: Usually between no and not given..

M: Sorry... because of the what?

4D: Not given state...

M: Ah... the not given... is that the part that confuses you?

1D: Yeah

5D: We can find the yes or no...

M: Ok... but the not given is challenging

1D: No or not given...

M: (unclear)... and you agree with that, yeah? No?

2D: Yes.

1D: The first one I tried to answer, but once I saw this question again, I didn't ...I just put yes, yes, yes, yes.

2D: I think you would lose mark in this question...

1E: No and not given is tricky.

M: Sorry?

1E: No and not given is tricky.

M: Oh... (unclear)... it's tricky?

1E: Yeah.

M: No, not given?

1E: Yeah

4E: Yeah

M: You both agree?

4E: Because...uh... sometimes you think it is not given and the answer is confusing between not given and no. Don't know what to put... if you put one of them and the other is right, you..uh.. will lose marks.

M: You will lose marks, yeah? So you are not sure sometimes..

4E: Yeah

M: ...whether the answer is no or ...

4E: not given.

M: Ok. Umm...if it were just yes, no would it be easier?

3E: I think yes.

1E: Yes.

4E: It's too confusing..

Overall, the *yes/no question* type appeared difficult for students mainly because of the *no* and *not-given* option. The distinction between the two seems unclear much of the time. Some students expressed intense emotion related to this question type, ranging from horror to panic. Again, the reasons for these experiences (at the level of the empirical) are linked to the structural domain at the level of the real. Students have simply never been familiarized with the literacy practices requiring higher order thinking in their educational training (Ridge, 2011).

3A: It way it looks like...Oh my God...

1D: The first one I tried to answer, but once I saw this question again, I didn't... I just put yes..yes..yes.. I hate this part...of the test.

**MC Questions** The *multiple choice* question rarely appeared on the reading component of the IELTS examination. When it did, the students experienced some mixed emotions at the level of the empirical, stating they were used to this type of question from their former schooling but that at times, the answer was difficult to choose. This was because the answer was not always literal but required higher order thinking skills – unlike what the students experienced in high school (Ridge, 2011). The mechanism (prior educational assessment) that explains this experience at the level of the empirical then falls into the domain of structure at the level of the real.

Group A and C did not have many ‘events’ like this on their examinations. Group B only had a few and found them relatively easy.

**Group B Excerpts**

M: Alright. Let's look at the next questions 23 to 27. They're a mix of ...umm... rethinking questions and literal but they're all multiple choice. Ok? What do you think?

4B: Easy.

M: You like that? Easy?

4B: It's because...uh... we... (unclear)

M: You have what?

2B: There is a number... like key words...

4B: Yeah

Members of Group D still felt this type of question was easier than the rest due to their familiarity with it but acknowledged that when the passage got more difficult, so did the ability to answer the MC question.

**Group D Excerpts**

1D: This one was easy..

3D: Easy

(Mix): The easiest one..

M: The easiest one? What's the easiest part? Is it the format?

4D: No, the multiple choice.

M: The multiple choice?

1D: Yeah.

M: So you find that easier... why do you think that's easier?

1D: Because I didn't find it hard to find the answers

M: No? Easy. Is it ...are you familiar with this question type more than ..

1D: Yeah..

M: ..... yes, no, not given?

1D/3D/4D: Yes – yeah- yuh

M: Why is that? How come you have had more exposure to that one?

1D: In high school mainly our...uh... English reading exam was ...the question was... all multiple...multiple choice

M: Ah, I see... in high school they had a lot of multiple choice?

1D: Yes

3D: Yeah

M: So you have a lot of experience with that?

1D: Yes

4D: Yes...

M: What about this one? Because the second reading is a little bit more difficult than the first. You still found the multiple choice easier?

1D: Not easier...like the first one.

M: Ok. Alright... let's look at the questions, quickly. 28 to 30 again multiple choice. Those are your favourites, you said. Now this is the most difficult passage, do you still think those are your favourites?

4D: Yes

1D: No

M: Yeah? No? (unclear) You have changed your mind?(laughter)

1D: I changed my mind...

Group E had several of these questions on their examination as well. Members in this group found the questions easy when the answers were *literal*. They also emphasized that the MC question limits the number of possible answers and so makes the task more manageable. Moreover, they felt very familiar with this question format (see full transcripts in Appendix D).

To sum up, then, the *multiple choice* question was not a common question on the reading part of the IELTS examination – comprising only 10% of all questions. According to the students, however, this question type is the one they are most familiar with due to their educational background. With so few *multiple choice* ‘events’ at the level of the actual occurring, students only experience a level of comfort with a small portion of the examination at the level of the empirical, allowing for a greater potential of bias to emerge.

**Student Test Results** Students claimed that the *multiple choice* questions were amongst the easiest on the examination and the *matching*, *fill in the blank* and *yes/no* questions amongst the most difficult. An analysis of student results confirmed some of these claims, but not all. Upon cross-referencing, it was found that the students who expressed difficulty with *matching* questions, did not – in fact - do well on them, with the

best amongst them getting 50% of the questions correct. Their perceived difficulty of the question type was reflected in their test results. This was consistent.

This cannot be said about the *fill in the blank* question type, however. Students who expressed difficulty with this question type performed inconsistently on these – with some doing well and others not so well. The students' comments about the extra structure (like a table or number) helping them to answer the question correctly did not have any evidence to support this.

The *yes/no question* type test results confirmed some of the students' claims. Test results showed that students fared better on *yes/no questions* in the early passages and not so well on the later – or more difficult – ones. This was predicted by them. There were, however, some inconsistent findings as well with students performing poorly on questions they claimed were easy.

The *multiple choice* question type was the one favoured by the students, claiming they are most familiar with this type. Test results, however, showed inconsistencies in scoring. This could be linked to the notion that *multiple choice* questions are problematic since it allows students to answer a question without having to read the passage (Ozuru et al., 2008). Moreover, *multiple choice* questions can produce an inaccurate picture of a student's ability to construct meaning (Valencia & Pearson, 1988) and may, in reality, be testing something entirely different than, say, an *open-ended* question (Manhart, 1996). Embretson and Wetzel (1987), however, believe that the difficulty of a reading question does not necessarily relate to the question type itself (ie *multiple choice*) but to two other elements: the complexity of the text (propositional density) and the amount of reasoning

needed to locate the answer in the text. With students in this study expressing different levels of difficulty on the various question types, a thorough evaluation of the questions on the examinations was therefore warranted.

Before we move on to explore those findings, it is important to address why the students' expected performances at the level of the actual with regards to question ability differed from the students' actual performances. According to Ackermann, Beier, and Bowen (2002), it is normal for all people to misjudge their abilities and knowledge. In some cases, people inflate their abilities while in other cases, they underestimate them. The students in this study were no exception.

**5.3.3 Evaluation of Questions: Results and Discussion** To complete the evaluation, each group's reading examination questions were closely examined to see if:

- a) the questions could be answered without reading the passage (AWRP)
- b) the questions addressed all parts of the passage (QAAP) and were distributed evenly throughout
- c) the questions were varied with all question types represented (VQ)
- d) the language in the questions was not more difficult than in the passages (LMDQ)

This evaluation is important in terms of identifying and comparing the events at the level of the actual. Do students face the similar 'events' on different tests?

**Results of Evaluation** Group A did the reading component of the Cambridge Book 7, Test 2. There were three passages: Pagodas Don't Fall Down, the True Cost of Food, and the Makete Integrated Rural Transport Project. In all three, none of the questions could be answered without reading the text. The language used in the questions

was not more difficult than that found in the text. Not all paragraphs, however, had questions addressing them – with one or two paragraphs not being addressed at all. The distribution of questions in those paragraphs that did have questions was found to be uneven, with more in some paragraphs than others. Just as importantly, one of the question types found in passage (*yes/no*) was repeated in passage two and three as well, making the question type a major component. The last two passages of the test both showed matching type questions as well - with the third passage having two sets of these questions, not one.

Table 8

*Evaluation Group A (Examination: Book 7, Test 2)*

Test	Passage	AWRP (N)	QAAP (Y)	VQ (Y)	LMDQ (N)
7.2	1	N	2 P no Q Uneven	Yes/no Classify MC	N
7.2	2	N	1 P no Q Uneven	Match Yes/no Fill blank	N
7.2	3	N	1 S no Q Uneven	Match Yes/no Match MC	N

Group B's question analysis revealed similar findings. Both sections on the language of the questions and the use of the text to answer questions were fine. However, each passage had at least one part of the text not addressed by the questions as well as an uneven distribution of questions throughout. The variety of questions for this reading test was limited with predominantly *yes/no* questions and *fill in the blank* questions as well as some *multiple choice*. As a result, students sitting this examination faced different 'events' at the level of the actual than the students sitting other examinations.

Table 9

*Evaluation Group B Examination (Book 3, Test 2)*

Test	Passage	AWRP (N)	QAAP (Y)	VQ (Y)	LMDQ (N)
3.2	1	N	P7 & P8 no Q Uneven	Yes/no Label Fill blank	N
3.2	2	N	Sec E no Q Uneven	Match Fill blank MC	N
3.2	3	N	P 9 no Q Uneven	Yes/no Fill blank MC	N

Group C's test fared much the same under the microscope as groups A and B, with one exception: the ability to answer some questions without reading the text. The latter was possible in two of the three passages to some degree. An example of such a question is the following true/false question from passage 3:

Q29 Forests are a renewable source of raw material.

With regards to question distribution, the passages saw an uneven distribution in general, with some paragraphs having more answers than others embedded in them. The highest numbers of questions were *yes/no*, *matching*, and *fill in the blank* - appearing in more than one passage.

Table 10

*Evaluation Group C Examination (Book 7, Test 3)*

Test	Passage	AWRP (N)	QAAP (Y)	VQ (Y)	LMDQ (N)
7.3	1	Y	P1 & P3 no Q Uneven	Yes/no Fill blank	N
7.3	2	N	P G – no Q Uneven	Match Fill blank Classify MC	N
7.3	3	Y	Uneven	Yes/no Match MC	N

Group D's examination showed a greater number of paragraphs unaddressed by questions than the other groups' examinations. Each passage had similar question types to the others, ranging from *matching* to *yes/no*, to *fill in the blank*, and *multiple choice* questions.

Table 11

*Evaluation of Group D Examination (Book 3, Test 4)*

Test	Passage	AWRP (N)	QAAP (Y)	VQ (Y)	LMDQ (N)
3.4	1	N	P A & J no Q Uneven	Match Yes/no MC	N
3.4	2	N	P 1, 9,10 no Q Uneven	MC Fill blank Yes/no	N
3.4	3	N	P1, 4, 5, 10 No Q Uneven	MC Fill blank Match	

Group E's examination showed some different results. Whereas all prior analyzed passages did not have questions addressing all parts of the reading, passage 1 on this test was different. Not only did all parts of the reading have questions related to them but the questions were relatively evenly distributed as well – something inconsistent with the findings so far. In passage 2, however, there were some general scientific questions (in the form of *yes/no*) that people could answer without having read the passage:

- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 19 | What is the name given to the molten rock from the mantle? |
| 20 | What is the earthquake zone on the Pacific Ocean called?   |

Passage 2 was divided into sections and the sections into paragraphs. Not all paragraphs had questions related to them but all sections did. The questions in passage 2, unlike passage 1, were unevenly distributed. Passage 3 only had the introduction not addressed by questions –all other paragraphs had questions. The questions throughout the passage,

however, varied in frequency depending on the paragraph, resulting – once again- in an uneven distribution. All three passages employed *fill in the blank* type questions, limiting the variety of questions on the test.

Table 12

*Evaluation of Group E Examination (Book 4, Test 3)*

Test	Passage	AWRP (N)	QAAP (Y)	VQ (Y)	LMDQ (N)
4.3	1	N	Y	MC Fill blank Yes/no	N
4.3	2	Y	P 1, 3, 11 no Q Uneven	WH Q Fill blank	N
4.3	3	N	P A Uneven	Match Fill blank	N

As stated earlier and confirmed by the above analysis, the reading examinations tended to heavily use *matching* questions, *fill in the blank* questions, and *yes/no* questions- but not in a consistent manner. There is no pattern of use that emerges from the data. The analysis also shows that the IELTS examination is not distributing question types evenly throughout its examinations. This means when one candidate takes the IELTS on one day the events of the actual are significantly different from the events of someone sitting the examination on another day.

With the content analysis and the question analysis completed, it is time to turn to the findings of the focus group analysis. Since this constitutes a major part of this study, an entire chapter is dedicated to its findings and subsequent discussions.

## Chapter 6

### Results and Discussions: Part 2

#### 6.1 Introduction

The last chapter of this thesis used a content analysis of the reading component of twenty IELTS examinations to identify events at the level of the actual from which test-takers' experiences and claims of cultural bias could be seen to emerge. This chapter shifts to the level of the empirical in that it uses students' experiences and observations to explore conditions at play at the level of the real. This exploration is achieved through the processes of retroduction and abduction with structures and mechanisms placed into Archer's (1996) domains of structure or culture. Archer's third category – agency- comes into play to activate the emergence of the event and thus the experience itself. This 'artificial' separation of the realm of the real in line with Archer's (1995) notion of analytical dualism discussed in the theory chapter allows us to see "whose conceptual shifts are responsible for which structural changes, when, where and under what conditions" (p. 146).

What follows is a result of this analysis. Since the structures and mechanisms are retroducted from the realm of the empirical, student experiences and perceptions appear first in this discussion in the form of a quotation, which attempts to summarise the experience or the observation, followed by a description of the actual. The structures and mechanisms retroducted in the process are then discussed in greater detail and substantiated by existing theory, studies, and other literature.

## 6.2 The Results

### Experience 1: I hate reading; it's hard

#### The Empirical

Over my ten years in the UAE, students in foundation programmes have consistently expressed dislike for reading, and the members of this focus group are by no means an exception. They complain about how hard reading is for them and voice their dislike in a number of ways:

3A: when I first saw how many paragraphs there were, I was shocked because this is the first time I have reading for IELTS, 3 readings

5D: the first time we were lost

1D: I hate this part of the test

1D: I never took a reading exam...that I like it. I always hate it.

4D: (in reference to 1D) All of us!

3E: very hard for our brain

3E: and my brain is blocked

1E: our mind go blank

1A: I guess the readings were... some of them were hard

5A: the first passage...ahh... it was ok but on the next page I was shocked

1A: it was difficult for me to get it here

2A: I get the idea but it wasn't organized well in my mind

1E: But the last one, I feel difficulty to read it and understand it

1C: ... you have to deeply concentrate

### **The Actual**

The above experiences emerge from the event of having to read three IELTS passages with forty questions within the time frame of a total of one hour. The reading passages range from 750 to 1000 words in length each. As mentioned in Chapter 1, topics in the texts come from a variety of sources (such as newspapers, journals, and magazines) and are written in a variety of styles (narrative, descriptive, argumentative) and are academic in so far as they deal with topics related to the academic disciplines. The experience of ‘shock’ at the amount of reading involved and the students’ strong distaste for reading can be seen to be a direct result of the absence of reading in their lives: “When I first saw how many paragraphs there were, I was shocked because this is the first time I have reading for IELTS, 3 readings”. This lack of reading is common and mentioned in several studies conducted in the UAE and Arab world (see Chapter 1). Another event emerging in the realm of the actual is the literacy practice involved with reading in the Arab world – that of recitation. The absence of reading and the literacy practice most commonly used in reading in the lives of our learners can be readily traced back to various structures and discourses in the domain of culture.

### **The Real**

**Structure** The absence of reading can be attributed to two main structures: the home of the students and the education of the students. The latter can be further reduced to include the structures of the school curriculum, the teachers’ background and training, and the Arab World as a whole.

**The Home** According to an article by Al Arabiya (Al Yacoub, 2012) which cites the Arab League Table of Readers, only 22% of Emiratis describe themselves as readers. One can – for the sake of argument – transfer this into an estimated 22% of homes boasting an environment that encourages reading (ie children are surrounded by books and are read to by parents). This translates into the majority of the homes that our students come from as being print-free or at best- print poor. A study conducted by Ridge and Farah (2012) was a little more favourable as it found that 52% of the students surveyed in a higher education institution reported to have had fewer than 50 books at home. Swan and Ahmed (2011) report - what could be constructed as- a dismal description of print literacy in UAE homes, confirming that little to no reading material can be found in the home. Studies have shown the importance of offering a print-rich environment for young learners in order to promote reading and the practices associated with school based learning. One such study, conducted by Van Steensel (2006), on the reading abilities of grade one and grade two students showed a marked difference in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition for learners coming from print-rich homes as compared to those originating from print-poor ones. Another study to back up this claim was conducted by Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill (1991) who found that children from print-rich home environments where parents model the various uses of literacy and literacy practices associated with schooling then do better in school. In fact, there is a growing body of research supporting the idea that children's early engagement with some literacies (ie in their homes) translates into higher school achievement later on in life (Barnett, 2003). Weigel, Martin, and Bennett (2006) recently

found evidence to support this claim as well in their study on homes with ‘facilitative mothers’ versus ‘conventional mothers’. The facilitative mothers gave their children homes that were more enriched with literacy practices associated with schooling than the conventional mothers’ who believed the teaching of literacy belonged in schools, not homes. This not only translated into a higher interest in reading for the children of the facilitative mothers but also into a greater knowledge of print itself. All this speaks to Street’s Ideological Model of Literacy (1993) in the New Literacy Studies that views literacy as embedded in social practice. How, what, where, and why we read is socio-culturally determined. Children in homes where families value literacies associated with schooling grow up valuing these literacies. The kind of literacy they value is linked to the literacy which they are exposed to in their lives. Street (1984) discovered the existence of multiple literacies in his work with communities in Iran, concluding from his work that literacy varies from context to context and culture to culture.

With a lack of reading resources and a lack of literacy habits associated with formal western schooling in the homes of our learners, it is understandable then, that they not only struggle with reading when they come to university but that they take little joy in the act of reading as well.

**The School** Along with the UAE’s embrace of a western-style education system comes the responsibility of the school within the system to offer print-rich environments for its learners. This means the school system must have ample reading spaces (ie libraries, classroom reading corners), reading resources, and reading opportunities for students. To date, this has not been the case in government schools in

the UAE (Ahmed, 2012). Libraries, cited as ‘the least-visited facilities’ in Abu Dhabi schools, lack age appropriate and modern resources according to the article. Some libraries are so dysfunctional that they lack proper furniture for students to use. Although the government has put in place a plan to change this (Abu Dhabi Education Council, 2013) and turn existing libraries into dynamic learning environments through its library upgrade project, the students who have gone through the system so far (ie the students in this research study) have experienced an unfortunate lack of exposure to print based texts. In fact, the article cites a study conducted for the Sheikh Saud Bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research (Ridge & Farah, 2012) which found that close to 70% of all students in grade 12 in government schools had minimal, if any, visits to the library in their last year of high school. So compounding the issue of inadequate library spaces and resources is the teachers’ unwillingness to take their students to the library. According to Ridge, who is cited in the news article, teachers are not familiar with libraries themselves and do not understand how to use them to foster learning. This calls into question the teachers own educational and literacy backgrounds as well as their teaching qualifications and even the curriculum of the schools themselves.

As explained in section 1.2.1, government schools in the UAE are generally staffed with teachers from the region –especially Egypt- due to the historical development of the education system in the UAE (Lootah, 2011), making the Arab World a structure in this study. One news article in *The National* (Salem, 2013) pointed out that even the private schools in the country rely on teachers from Egypt, Syria, Morocco, and Jordan for their staffing. Ridge (2010) cites 2008 statistics from the Ministry of

Education of the UAE to confirm this claim, highlighting that over 80% of the male teachers in the public education system come from neighbouring Arab countries.

Teachers from these countries tend to come from the lowest level of educated society since the teaching profession itself is viewed as a last resort career (Ridge, 2010). Many of the teachers in the UAE public education system, according to Ridge (2011) and Badry (2012), are under-qualified and use outdated teaching methods – at least from a western educational perspective. From Street's perspective, these teachers simply draw on different literacies to the ones dominant in western school systems. A look at Egypt's current state of education verifies the difference between the literacies found in the west versus the ones in the Middle East. According to Loveluck (2012), who wrote a background paper on the challenges found in Egypt's educational system, Egypt's state schools offer what she refers to as 'poor-quality' education by unqualified and underpaid teachers whose main pedagogy is based on rote-learning and memorization. In an address at a Washington, DC conference, the First Deputy to the Minister of Education in Egypt – Dr Reda Abouserie (2010) – concedes that the literacy taught in Egypt is different from the western school system. She describes the teaching of reading in Egyptian schools as the memorization of a textbook, with the teachers reading the text orally and the students following along quietly. According to Ridge (Ahmed, 2012), teachers in the government schools are unfamiliar with libraries themselves and so do not take their students to the library to engage with print and other kinds of literacy. These expatriate teachers with different literacies and different methodologies of teaching are, therefore - at least in part-responsible for the feelings of difficulty, dislike, and disinterest expressed by their former

students who attempt to read IELTS passages in that they have not used their agency to structure their learners reading experiences.

Teachers, however, should not be the only ones held accountable. When the curriculum being used in the government schools does nothing to promote the critical thought needed for academic reading, it too must bear some responsibility. With the content of the curriculum mainly being assessed through standardized tests which require students to have memorized parts of the textbooks (Ridge, 2011), it is no surprise that students entering foundation programmes in the UAE express difficulty with and dislike for the kind of reading they encounter on the IELTS which tends to be, at times, critical in nature rather than simply referential. This means students need to read with a willingness to question the text using previous experience and knowledge of other texts. Critical reading is about reflection and the use of judgement to establish the reasoning used in the texts that support its claims. It is an:

... elaboration of ideas and understandings drawn from the material students read and from what they already know. They must learn to value their own ideas and to defend as well as question their interpretations in face of alternative or opposing points of view. (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1985, p. 8)

The curriculum in the government schools in the UAE does not foster much referential reading - let alone critical reading- in English since the majority of the teaching is of mathematics, science, Arabic, and Islamic Studies (Ridge, 2011). One might assume that Arabic would subsume the practice of extensive reading, however, this

is not the case. An extensive report – *Arabic for Life* - written by a commission tasked to review and assess the teaching of Arabic in the UAE (Nazzal, 2013) found that the main purpose of teaching Arabic (according to both students and teachers) was the teaching of grammar. This is currently being done at the expense of reading and writing in Arabic – something the Ministry is planning on rectifying in the near future by designating one class a week for reading only (Nazzal, 2013). Although a press release was issued for this new initiative, I was unable to find any official government decrees or reports on the matter.

**Culture** The absence of reading can also be attributed to discourses. As described in Chapter 4, a discourse equates to a set of ideas ‘held together’ in language or some other sign system which construct what it is possible to do and not to do or to think or not to think. The experience of shock, dismay, and dislike that our students reported having when faced with the IELTS reading passages can be retroducted to discourses which construct reading as unimportant and as a set of practices which entail dutiful acceptance of the written word.

**Discourse of the ‘Unimportance of Reading’** Students in the UAE have been raised in an environment that largely reflects the values of an oral culture (Swan & Ahmed, 2011). This means that traditionally the:

... verbal elements in culture—literate and non-literate, but especially the latter—are transmitted by a long chain of interlocking face-to-face conversations between members of the group. All beliefs and values are related orally, face-to-face, and are held in human memory. (Rosenberg, 1987, p.75)

From the perspective of Street's (1993) ideological model, there are – of course – multiple literacies, some of which involve only minimal engagement with print.

Historically and culturally, however, engagement with printed text in some societies has not been privileged. Writing from a position in the autonomous model, Heard Bey (2013, p. 114) notes:

Since the days of widespread illiteracy people have kept the memory of legends, stories and the much-loved local poetry called *nabati*, because the spoken word has always been the superior art form of the tribal people, who lacked the raw materials used elsewhere for more tangible forms of artistic expression.

This, of course, does not include the prescribed daily reading of the Holy Quran. Beyond this, however, there is very little reading prevalent in UAE society and culture (see Chapter 1). With very little reading occurring at home (see earlier discussion), families in the UAE leave the task of teaching the young to read largely up to the schools. This belief that oral culture but not written culture belongs in the home relegates reading to a lesser status in UAE society. This discourse of less importance or 'Unimportance' is at the root of the perceptions experienced by the students in this study. This belief system allows for the dearth of books and other print materials in the students' homes, with the exception of the Holy Quran of course -- which brings us to the discourse behind one of the main literacy practices of the UAE: recitation.

**Discourse of 'Acceptance of the Written Word'** From an early age, children in Emirati homes witness the daily reading of the Holy Quran in the form of

recitation. This is a literacy practice which features as an ‘event’ in the actual. This practice becomes a major part of the students’ early experiences of reading. It emerges from the realm of the real as a set of values which prescribes how a sacred religious text is to be handled. Since the Quran is believed to have come directly from God and “urges people to submit themselves to the will of God” (Kaltner, 2011, p. 2), it is unacceptable to question the contents within. Even though the Quran “employs a wide variety of literary devices and figures of speech, including metaphors, parables, and rich imagery” (Kaltner, 2011, p. 10), interpretation of the verses is done only by religious authorities. Students take this discourse to their other reading experiences in school (ie our university foundation programme) where academic texts coming from different cultures and contexts require a different discourse altogether – one that values critical thought and demands individual interpretation. This clash of discourses serves as a generative mechanism to produce the experiences of shock, confusion, and dislike that were noted in this study.

This conflict of discourses, however, would come as no surprise to Street as it speaks to his Ideological Model of Literacy in the New Literacy Studies (NLS). As mentioned earlier, Street (2003) contends that reading (and the knowledge of what it is and how it is used) is rooted in social identity and social practice: “reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being...” (p. 78) and varies from one culture and context to another. This clearly explains the experience of the students. If our students are used to reading in non-critical ways because of what is valued in their culture and have little to no exposure to higher order thinking practices –

as Ridge (2011) confirms – then it stands to reason that they feel the way they do about the IELTS reading examinations.

**Agency** Students in this study, when faced with the three reading passages on the IELTS examination, draw on the structural and cultural domains described above. The absence of reading in the students' lives is due to a predominantly oral culture that does not value reading. Reading experiences, beyond recitation of the Quran, are few and far between both in the home and at school in the UAE, bringing forth the emergence of the experiences at the level of the real.

### **Experience 2:           The questions are too difficult**

#### **The Empirical**

In my professional experience at various UAE higher institutions, students taking the IELTS reading examination often complain about the difficulty of the questions following the passages. The students interviewed in the focus group expressed this sentiment emphatically:

1A:   ...when you come to the question... it's quite difficult to know what do they want exactly

3A:   ... when I came to the questions, it was somehow tricky

2A:   ... I couldn't figure which ... which one for which paragraph

5A:   ... so we are confusing which is better to choose

1A: ... the hardest question in the last passage...with no more time for you to think about it

5A: ... you cannot understand the questions and the paragraph itself

3A: ... you get confused whether it's no or not giving

2B: ... I am afraid about this question

7B: ... that why I hate it

3B: ... I don't like this question

4B: ... maybe all my answers will be wrong

2B: ... 7 (choices)! And it makes difficult

2B: ... the kind of the questions is difficult

5C: ... (the questions) was tricky

1C: ... I usually have trouble with not-given

M: ...you all do?

Mix: ...Yes. Yeah.

3C: ...It's tricky sometimes

2C: ... some of the words...seem like.. so similar to each other because we can't

...like...just choose... any one.

1C: ...difficult to answer the question

4C: ...I found this question more confusing

2C: ... if you want..like..to solve it, you need, like.. uh... various types of technologic

[techniques]

Mix: ... ah...confusing...confusing..yup

4C: ... because it's not direct, you have to figure out... you just have to figure out yourself

3C: ...hard

4C: ...I think too it would be easier if the number of the questions equals the number of the answers

5C: ...The exam is hard.

1D: ...The first one I tried to answer, but once I saw this question again, I didn't.... I just put yes, yes, yes, yes.

2D: ... I think you would lose mark in this question

3D: ... it can be more than... than one...than one...answer

1D: ... because with some question, I just lose the hope

### **The Actual**

The event the above perceptions and feelings emerge from is the questions the students face on the IELTS reading passages. The earlier question analysis (see Chapter 5) revealed a marginally greater use of *reinterpretation/rethinking* questions than *literal* ones. The question type most often used was the *rethinking matching* one in the form of matching headlines or main ideas to paragraphs with some *literal matching* questions as well for an average of 11 per examination. The other question type featuring prominently was *fill in the blank* with an overall average of 10.9 questions per examination. The majority of these were *rethinking* in nature. The *Yes/No/Not Given* questions fell into

third place with most being *literal* in form while *multiple choice* questions came in fourth place with less representation overall.

### **The Real**

**Structure** The difficulty students have answering the IELTS questions can be traced back to the school system from whence the students came and in particular – their former school assessment.

**School Assessment** The government schools in the UAE feature a curriculum devoid of critical thought and problem solving (Ridge, 2011). According to Al Amiri (2012), the assessment tools used to evaluate students entrenched within this system are focused on measuring the ability to memorize. Ridge (2011) concurs with this, labelling the issue as one of the system's major weaknesses. With assessment not only informing but also influencing teaching, it comes as no surprise to see rote-learning and memorization in the classrooms in the UAE as a result. My personal experience with the students in the UAE is that examinations are all that matter. If it is not on the examination, students tell me there is no room for it in the classroom. This is a remnant of their high school experience. Although efforts are underway to modernize and diversify the assessment tools used in the public education system to match a western form of literacy (Al-Qutami, 2011), the students taking part in this study have not benefited from that effort. Students in this study confirmed that their high school experiences of reading assessment consisted mainly of literal WH- type questions; in other words, questions devoid of higher order thought with a limited choice of answers:

M: These are multiple choice again.... I have labeled them literal which means they are fairly direct – you can find the answers in the text without doing too much rethinking.

1D: This one was easy

3D: Easy

Mix: The easiest one...

4D: ...the multiple choice

M: So you find that easier... why do you think that's easier?

1D: Because I didn't find it hard to find the answers

M: ... are you familiar with this question type more than...

1D: Yeah

M: ... yes, no, not-given?

1D/3D/4D: yes – yeah – yuh

M: Why is that? How come you have had more exposure to that one?

1D: In high school mainly our...uh.... English reading exams was .... the question was...all multiple... multiple choice

M: So you have had a lot of experience with that?

1D: Yes

With the students in this study having experienced mainly one type of assessment in high school, the type of assessment found on the IELTS reading test (see Chapter 5 for

more details) would be unfamiliar to them, thereby causing the emergence of their feelings of confusion and frustration.

**Culture** The cultural domain features prominently in explaining the students' difficulty with the question types on the IELTS examination as well - through the discourse of 'Obedience' embedded within Emirati culture.

**Discourse of 'Obedience'** Emirati society, as indicated in Chapter 1, is guided by Islamic values and beliefs as is much of the Arab world. Riel (2011), a cross-cultural writer, captures the importance of this in an article written for the Eaton Consulting Group:

Perhaps no trait is more characteristic of the United Arab Emirates than its religious faith. In fact, throughout the Middle East, no understanding of national identity or culture is truly possible without first grasping the spiritual heritage of Islam. (2011, p. 1)

The only other prevailing influence in Emirati society that comes close to that of religion is tribal structure. Wilfred Thesinger (1991, p. 94) described the society as follows:

The society in which the Bedu live is tribal. Everyone belongs to a tribe and all members of the same tribe are in some degree kinsmen, since they are descended from a common ancestor. The closer the relationship the stronger is the loyalty which a man feels for his fellow tribesmen, and this loyalty overrides personal feelings, except in extreme cases ... [i]n the last resort a man who refuses to accept a tribal decision can be ostracized.

Both Islam and the tribal way of life in the UAE share one dominant feature: absolute obedience.

In Islam, the Holy Quran is accepted as the word of God with “the language of the Quran... unsurpassable and impossible for any humans to replicate” (Kaltner, 2011, p. 14). Consequently, the sacred text is considered to be one of perfection- not to be questioned by the lay person. Interpretation of the text is not done by the reader him/herself but rather by highly trained religious scholars. According to Riel (2011), Islam’s teaching of submission to God is partially responsible for the hierarchical society found in the UAE. The blind obedience associated with Islam is a discourse engrained into the students’ lives from a very young age. The written word is not to be open to individual interpretation or analysis.

This discourse of ‘Obedience’ is further cemented in the learners’ lives through tribal traditions where the father is the head of the family and the opinions of elders are highly regarded. Since “a person’s individual existence is embedded in his group” (Heard-Bey, 2013, p. 98), s/he is obliged to act in the family or tribe’s best interest, often at great personal expense. Heard-Bey describes the tribal obligations as follows:

Within the fold of the tribe, the individual head of the family (himself, wife and children) is traditionally bound by inescapable obligations of mutual assistance and a concept of joined honour to his immediate blood relatives... (2013, p. 99)

Consequently obedience to the head of the family and for the good of the family is integral to the survival of the tribe.

This discourse of familial ‘Obedience’ coupled with the discourse of religious ‘Obedience’ shapes the students’ outlook on life – including their approach to reading. More than half of the questions the students face on the IELTS reading examination require the application of some form of higher order thinking (see Chapter 5 for more details). As discussed, these practices are largely foreign to the students since their approach to reading and thinking has been discursively constructed. The students’ unquestioning obedience and lack of critical thought is evident in one of the student’s comments about the order of the readings on the IELTS examination:

1A: So, if they reorder it like... if they put the hardest first, it will maybe become easier for us to answer the third one and we will get better answers...

The student could have reordered the readings on his/her own but chose not to, confirming the linear thought processes our students apply to the task. Rather than questioning his/her approach to the reading passages, the student blindly obeyed the instructions and completed the passages in the order presented. In order for that to change, the student indicates IELTS examiners – not the students themselves - need to reorder the passages.

It is clear from the above reaction of the student as well as his/her colleagues in the study that their sociocultural backgrounds affect their ability to deal with the reading passages and the related questions. This confirms Gee’s (2001) view of reading as situated language: “Comprehension of written and verbal language is as much about

experience with the worlds of home, school, and work as it is about words” (p. 714). This also fits in with Street’s (1993) Ideological Model of Reading which argues that reading is not a neutral set of skills but rather a social act influenced by one’s way of life and being.

**Agency** When confronted with the questions on the reading passages of the IELTS examination, students in this study draw on the structural and cultural domains described above. The students’ high school experiences of traditional assessment coupled with the familial and religious discourse of ‘Obedience’ with which the students are raised bring forth the emergence of the negative experiences at the level of the empirical.

### **Experience 3:           The passages are too long and difficult**

#### **The Empirical**

Whenever I find myself teaching an IELTS class, students invariably state that the passages are generally too long. This usually goes hand in hand with the complaint of too little time, which will be addressed a little later in this chapter. During the focus group interviews, the following feelings were voiced by the students regarding the length and difficulty of the passages:

1A:   ... there was a lot of information

3A:   ... when I first saw how many paragraphs there were, I was shocked...

1A:   ... the longest passage

2B:   ... it’s difficult for us because it’s the 3<sup>rd</sup> passage

- 5C: ... the exam was hard
- 4D: ... the third one a little bit long and hard
- 3D: ... but it's too long
- 1D: ... and there are charts at the end of the passage... it freaked me out... it's the first time for me
- 4D: ... the timing and the long passage
- 2D: ... time and complicated
- 1E: ... the last one, I feel difficulty to read it and understand it. Each time I confused. Go back, read and don't understand the idea so
- 3E: ... very hard for our brain
- 4E: ... sometimes the paragraph is too long
- 1E: ... three paragraphs [means readings] in the exam is too much

### **The Actual**

The above feelings emerge from having to read three academic texts in a row within the time frame of one hour. The texts are similar in length ranging from 750 to 1000 words. The tests (as well as the individual passages) show similar syntactical difficulty - in terms of clauses and reduced clauses with a slight variation in the use of passive voice. Each test was shown to employ between 86- 96 clauses/reduced clauses and 35- 61 uses of passive voice (for more details see Chapter 5). This comes to an average of 92 clauses/reduced clauses per test and 50 instances of the passive voice.

**The Real**

**Structure** The above experiences of students' difficulty coping with the length and density of the passages can be traced back to two structures: the school and its reading resources and the students' exposure to religious texts.

**The School** The absence of reading in both the students' homes and schools has already been addressed in detail in this chapter and resurfaces here again. The lack of reading programmes implemented in UAE government schools is at least partially responsible for the students' experiences of difficulty with the passage length of academic type texts. For students to feel comfortable with the length and density of passages found in magazines, journals, textbooks etc. (ie text types found on the IELTS examination) they must be exposed to these texts – not only once but many times. One of the student's comments illustrates the students' surprise, confirming that their schools had failed to give them this exposure:

3A: ... when I first saw how many paragraphs there were, I was shocked because this is the first time I have reading for IELTS – 3 readings.

It stands to reason that with the UAE's embrace of the western education system there would be a library stocked with print-rich resources of all kinds in every school, but this is not the case. In the 2010 American Library Association report (2013), the average school library in America spent \$12, 260 per year on resources with high schools spending even more. The average library collection in high schools consists of 12,741

books and 27 magazine/periodical subscriptions. To date, the libraries in the government schools in the UAE do not match this investment or collection size, although this has been mandated to change (Abu Dhabi Education Council, 2013).

But for students to become familiar and comfortable with any kind of text, they must have extensive exposure to and engagement with the text type – in our case, dense academic type texts. Hoyt (1999) uses the example of an informational text to make the point, claiming “readers must have both extensive and intensive experience with information-bearing text” (p 121) to become reflective readers. This is in line with Street’s (1993) Ideological Model of Literacy which emphasizes that literacy is multi-faceted and hails from social practice. The literacy the students practice in their social environments, be it at home or in school, is the literacy that they are familiar with. In this case, it is not long and dense academic texts. If the UAE government high schools lack resources and a curriculum that engage students in the kind of literacy needed to prepare students for the academic nature of the IELTS examination, then it is understandable that the students in this study were overwhelmed by the length and difficulty of the texts they faced. Students need time with and exposure to the texts to gain some level of comfort with them.

**Religion** As mentioned previously, students in this study probably had their earliest literacy experiences at home with their parents and other family members reading the Holy Quran daily. The Quran is made up of 114 chapters and 6300 verses with the longest chapters generally coming first (Kaltner, 2011). This ordering of the Quran may

shed some light on one of the students' comments regarding the last passage on the IELTS reading examination (often viewed as the hardest and longest by students):

1A: So if they [IELTS writers] reorder it like... if they put the hardest first, it will maybe become easier for us...

The longest chapter is 286 verses while the shortest consists of only 7. It is important to note that the Quran is not meant to be read from cover to cover as the chapters are not in chronological order (Kaltner, 2011). The amount of time spent daily on reading the Quran varies from person to person but an average of 5 -15 minutes every day is recommended to finish the entire holy book within eight months, according to the Online Islamic Academy (Sunni Path, 2013). Given that students may have been raised with the literacy practice of reading one chapter or so of the Holy Quran per day, thereby limiting their daily reading exposure to no more than fifteen minutes, it is reasonable that they experience difficulty with the length and density of the three passages on the IELTS examination.

**Culture** The above student experiences also emerge from the fact that reading culture is not valued to the same degree as oral culture in the UAE. The discourse of 'Unimportance of Reading' has been called upon once already in this study and continues to influence student experiences.

**The Discourse of the 'Unimportance of Reading'** As mentioned earlier in the study, students in the UAE come from a culture that largely mirrors the values of an

oral culture (Swan & Ahmed, 2011) relegating reading to a less important position in society. Surveys (see Al Yacoub 2012, Albawaba Business 2011) confirm that only a low percentage of the population in the UAE and the region read regularly. With an average book consisting of anywhere between 76000 words to over 100,000 words depending on the genre of the book (Book Genome Project, 2012), that would make around 150 pages or more of reading per book.

Regularly reading novels consisting of this length would help students better handle the length and density of the IELTS reading passages since numerous studies have shown that extensive reading helps improve overall second language competence, even amongst the most unmotivated (Mason & Krashen, 1997). Unfortunately with little to no reading culture, only around 22% of the total UAE population (Al Yacoub, 2012) could be expected to have experience with extensive reading. The students in this study may well not be represented in that number as an online poll in the entire region conducted by Yahoo! Maktoob Research showed that 30% of the people under the age of 25 rarely, if ever, pick up a book to read (Albawaba Business, 2011). This discourse then plays an integral part in explaining the experiences the students have voiced in this study.

**Agency** The students - when faced with the length and density of the texts on the IELTS examination- draw on the structural and cultural domains outlined above. Lack of exposure to long and complex text types in high school coupled with the short daily reading of the Quran are in part responsible for the shock of and distaste for longer and more complex passages. These structures along with the discourse of the ‘Unimportance

of Reading' bring forth the emergence of the adverse feelings expressed at the level of the Empirical.

**Experience 4: The topics are unfamiliar; topics should be familiar**

**The Empirical**

Often times in my professional teaching career in the UAE, students have expressed dislike for a variety of reading topics, especially ones they were unfamiliar with or found culturally inappropriate. One such example occurred when a number of students refused to read a passage about the love people in the west have for their dogs. Students who took part in this study also voiced their frustration with unfamiliar topics on the IELTS examination claiming that topics they were exposed to in high school or through the media were easier for them.

3A: ... the reading is related to something religious and these kinds of things and... I don't know things the religion in east Asia

1A: ... if the article was about Burj Khalifa, maybe I'll understand most of it...

2B: ... you can read, you must have a knowledge, a background about the topics

M: ... and when you have a new idea, how does this make you feel...?

3B: You must read it more than one time.

M: ... so you don't know anything about [the topic of role theory]?

4B: ... why would we?

1D: ... [the topic of] pollution is familiar to us... but its was ....its was a new thing...  
topic... we won't feel this comfortable

M: ... And the topic [of women voting] itself is something you are familiar with?

3D/1D: No. No.

3D: But we heard about it.

M: Do you vote personally, each of you?

1D: No

M: Do you have a lot of background on this?

5D: Not much...

4D: ... the passage should be in our field... not outside

M: In your field? Meaning?

4D: Like...not medical or something complicated we don't know

M: Is it something that you're familiar with? Street Youth?

3E: No.. because we don't have that kind of programme here...but we understand it

M: Ok...let's look at the last reading 'Obtaining Linguistic Data'. What do you think  
of that title? Did you know what it meant?

Mix: Ah no..no

1E: Nothing...it's my first time that I heard about it

4E: Me too.

M: How familiar are you with this topic [volcanoes]?

3E: Good because I read ... read about volcanoes before... in high school

4E: Yes.

1E: Yeah... because volcanoes is a general topic that's uh...uh... all the ...all the peoples are talking about. We see it in news and newspapers, tvs and programmes so we have a small background on this topic.

### **The Actual**

The experiences the students describe come from the topics of the three readings on their IELTS examinations, which were different for the various groups. Group A read about pagodas, the cost of food, and a rural African transport project. Group B read about a dung beetle, the effect of fertilizers on farming, and the concept of role theory. Group C read about the intelligence of ants, the role of genetics in determining population movements, and European forest policy. Group D read about pollution, the women's voting movement in the UK, and an experiment on productivity and attitude in the workplace while Group E read about a street youth programme, volcanoes, and how to obtain linguistic data for a study.

### **The Real**

**Structure** The above experiences students had with the topics of the IELTS examination can be traced back to the structure of their limited high school curriculum.

**The School Curriculum** As mentioned earlier, the high school curriculum generally focuses on the teaching of a limited number of subjects: mathematics, the different sciences, Arabic, and Islamic studies with some English as well (Ridge, 2011).

The students in the study confirmed the lack of diversity in subjects at high school, especially for the higher grades, although some variance was recorded:

M: What about in school? Did you study any psychology or anything related to this [topic]?

3B: No.

1C: Because in my secondary school, I didn't ...eh... take an history... in high school ... just about English, math, and physics.

4C: I had history in grade 10 and then I stopped.

5C: Just to grade 9.

2C: I know more specific words about genetics

5C: Yeah [I agree]

M: Was it studied in high school like he said?

5C: Yeah, in high school... biology

3C: I don't study.

1C: We just have physics and chemistry.

Students indicated that the topics they were most familiar with were the ones they had studied at school:

1D: It is not... it is not the first time to hear it. We hear it a lot.

M: ...did you study that then in high school?

Mix: Yeah... yeah

- M: ...did you study pollution in high school?
- Mix: Yes... yeah
- 1D: Pollution is familiar to us. ...its was a new topic... we won't feel this comfortable
- 2D: Sometime the topics... is a new... sometime we get a topic...eh... that we are not familiar with...so we shocked.
- M: So you have been exposed to the topic [volcano] before?
- 3E: Yeah
- M: How? In ... in high school or in...?
- 3E: Yeah... yeah... in high school
- M: You too?
- 4E: Yes.
- 1E: It's my first time that I heard about it
- 4E: Ah... maybe I don't have experience about ... like not talked about previous in high school or something or even in my life

The students' experience of unfamiliarity with the IELTS topics can largely be traced back to the limited school curriculum in the government schools in the UAE as a result. Although students spoke of other possible avenues of exposure to topics, such as TV documentaries, newspapers, and magazines, they generally referred to not having studied the subject in school as the main cause of not knowing something.

With little exposure to reading, however, watching TV would be a reasonable alternative for acquiring topic knowledge. The Arab Advisors Group report a 96%

viewership in the UAE (2011). A recent survey by OSN on the television viewing habits of the inhabitants of the region shows that on average a person watches 3.1 hours of television a day. Unfortunately the survey indicates that the majority of the hours are spent on popular television series (Trade Arabia, 2013). If this holds true for students in the region, then the types of programmes that could help students with their academic studies (like documentaries) are not being watched. If students do not acquire topic knowledge through television, newspapers, and magazines, then the pressure to provide this knowledge is placed squarely on the shoulders of the school system once again.

Unfortunately, the limited curriculum in the government schools falls short on this as it does not match the broad perspective of the western model that the UAE government is trying to implement. An example of the disparity between the two systems is highlighted by the secondary education curriculum of Ontario, Canada which aims to enable students to customize their education:

The goal of Ontario secondary schools is to support high-quality learning while giving individual students the opportunity to choose programs that suit their skills and interests. The updated Ontario curriculum, in combination with a broader range of learning options outside traditional classroom instruction, will enable students to better customize their high school education and improve their prospects for success in school and in life. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 3)

The curriculum itself consists of a myriad of classes from which students can choose ranging from the arts (drama, dance, music, visual arts), business studies, Canadian and world studies, social sciences and humanities, technological education, Native languages, Native studies, health and physical education, to computer studies – to name but a few.

Since the curriculum in the UAE government schools is limited and students do not gain much topic knowledge through other sources of media, it is understandable then that the knowledge the students bring to the IELTS reading examination is limited in scope as well.

**Culture** The above experiences also emerge from a belief system that things outside the realm of the Muslim world, or ideas in conflict with Islam or UAE society, are not worthy of knowing. This is often termed ‘un-Islamic’. This idea was introduced earlier on when I explained that students refused to read a passage about the human love for dogs. Three students in the focus group touched on this idea as well; the first one talking about why she knows nothing about pagodas because it is outside here religion and the second and third ones talking about how offensive it is to compare human intelligence to ant intelligence (in Islam humans are a higher life form):

3A: ... but I don't know things the religion in east Asia, generally

M: But why is that?

3A: It's not something we are interested in knowing about.

M: Do you find the topic offensive in any way? That your intelligence is being compared to an ant.

2C: I think that... yes.

M: Do you think it's offensive?

3C: Yes.

**The Discourse of the 'Un-Islamic'** Although the Holy Quran and various Islamic traditions highlight the importance of the search for knowledge all over the world, Muslims have at times limited their knowledge primarily to that of theology (Akhtar, 1997). My personal experience with this confirms these claims as knowledge related to the west is often viewed as 'un-Islamic' by our students. Although I have not been able to find any academic literature on this subject, this discourse seeps through in classroom discussions, university entrance interviews, IELTS speaking examinations, and students' written work. Although blogs on the internet do not hold any academic value, they - too – confirm the mindset of some of our students regarding western education (and topics) as being in opposition to Islamic values and beliefs. Take, for example, a blog on studying medicine in the west on sunniforum.com:

Originally Posted by **curious-traveller** 

*Some of my younger relatives want to become doctors. However , the medical education in the Western style medicine school is full of many un-Islamic rules. How a a Muslim student can avoid those rules ? I found a fatwa from the ask-imam which has made me confused.*

*"When becoming a medical doctor (in the UK) the following must be done:*

*i. dissecting a dead human body (that may be of the opposite gender and unclothed)*

*ii. pictures of the human body are examined.*

*The previous 2 are necessities when becoming a doctor. Will it be permissible for me (a male) to pursue a career in medicine? Can you please give evidence. Jazakallah*

<http://www.islam.tc/cgi-bin/askimam/...1204&act=print>

*The answer to this question is like this*

*2. A human body deserves utmost respect. Rasulallah [Sallallaahu Alayhi Wasallam] is reported to have said? **Breaking a bone of a dead person is the same as breaking it whilst he is alive.? Hence, dissection of a human body is not permissible.***

*and Allah Ta'ala Knows Best*

*Mufti Muhammad Kadwa*

*FATWA DEPT.*

*CHECKED & APPROVED: Mufti Ebrahim Desai*

Source: (<http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?73478-Choosing-the-medical-profession-How-to-avoid-un-Islamic-rules-in-Medical-education>)

Hudson (2011), too, reinforces the existence of this discourse in the Gulf region:

This need for the consideration of cultural issues in the teaching of vocabulary to Arab learners means that, for many teachers who are teaching from books and materials not specifically designed for this part of the world, a censorial approach (Hyde, 1994, p. 297) towards certain lexis in the class is usually adopted. This can involve the simple substitution of haram lexis for inoffensive lexis (saying ‘Pepsi’

instead of ‘wine’ when the latter appears in the course book, for example), the omission of certain pages or units of the course book that contain controversial topics...(2011, p. 128)

With a belief system in place where the studying of un-Islamic topics is forbidden or inappropriate at best, it is reasonable to assume that students will bring limited knowledge to a western written test such as the IELTS. Here is yet another example of culture influencing the practice of literacy as Street (1993) and other supporters of the New Literacy Studies contend.

**Agency** When students engage with the various topics on the IELTS examination, they draw on the afore-mentioned structural and cultural domains. The feelings the students expressed at the level of the empirical on the unfamiliarity of the topics emerge from the structure of their high school curriculum and their discourse of not wanting to learn about what they deem ‘un-Islamic’ topics.

**Experience 5:           The topics are not interesting; should be interesting to us**

### **The Empirical**

Students in my previous reading classes, be it IELTS or otherwise, often express disinterest in the topics of the passages. This, they say, fuels their unwillingness to work with the text and the questions. In this focus group study, ‘interest’ featured prominently in the student comments.

- M: So tell me, how do you feel about this title?
- 1A: Not interested.... I'm bored... I don't want to read it
- 3A: It's not something we are interested in knowing about.
- 1A: ... that's why it's better to have an interesting topic so when you read about the topic, the information are still in your head
- 3A: They must put in articles with an interesting photo or an interesting title at least ... like she said... it really helps a lot when we are reading
- 2B: When you are interested about something, you can concentrate more on the subject
- 3B: I think you must be interest in reading but it's not in the IELTS exam
- 4B: Maybe if I interested in the passage..., I can ... uh... answer all the questions easily and uh... find the answer quickly
- 3C: I am interested in this.
- 5C: The topic is ... is captivating.
- 4C: As far as I'm concerned, I find this ... the essay more interesting than the previous one.
- 5C: Once I read the topic, I'm interested to read the whole passage.
- 1D: ... it is really boring

### **The Actual**

The experiences described by the students above emerge from the topics of the readings on the various passages of the IELTS examination. As already indicated, each

topic on the examination was different. Topics on the five examinations ranged from farming to food, to bizarre beetles, role theory, transportation programmes in rural Africa, population movement, pollution, a women's movement, business productivity, volcanoes, forests, linguistic data collection, and a street youth programme. The range was diverse and touched on many different subject matters.

### **The Real**

According to the students, the topics of the various reading passages were overall boring and of little interest to them, with only a couple of exceptions. The students indicated an unwillingness to read as a result, claiming that interesting articles were needed to motivate them. This brings two important concepts to the forefront: one to do with the lack of interest and one to do with student attitude. The lack of interest can be traced back to the lack of exposure at school and the attitude to the discourse of 'Entitlement' in UAE society.

**Structure** The students' experiences at the level of the empirical can partially be attributed to the lack of exposure to different topics in high school. The school curriculum, therefore, becomes an important structure to examine.

**The School Curriculum** Ridge and Farah (2012), as mentioned earlier, report the school curriculum in the government high schools consists of a limited number of subjects. In order to gain interest in a subject matter, exposure to the subject is needed. Research has shown that topic interest plays a role in students' willingness to do reading-

related tasks (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). The students echoed this sentiment in the focus group study. One example of this is:

4B: Maybe if I interested in the passage..., I can ... uh... answer all the questions easily and uh... find the answer quickly

Hidi (2006) confirms this would occur as interest acts as “a unique motivational variable...characterized by increased attention, concentration and affect” (2006, p. 70). With a high school curriculum focusing mainly on the teaching of the sciences, math, English, Arabic and Islamic studies (Ridge, 2011), students have limited exposure to other topics. This, then, indicates that the high school curriculum is partly responsible for the emergence of the students’ feeling of disinterest in the topics found on the IELTS examination.

### **Culture**

**The Discourse of ‘Entitlement’** The students expressed that their boredom with the topics on the IELTS examination influenced the amount of effort they put into a reading:

1A: Not interested.... I’m bored... I don’t want to read it... it’s better to have an interesting topic so when you read about the topic, the information still in your head

3A: They must put in articles with an interesting photo or an interesting title at least ... like she said... it really helps a lot when we are reading... [when] we are learning something new because we like the topic... we are challenging ourselves to understand ...

My personal experience teaching in the UAE has consistently shown that if the students lacked interest in a reading topic, they simply would not read, regardless of the fact that the curriculum and teachers required them to do so. No amount of cajoling would get the students to read the passage. This attitude of ‘I read only what I want to when I want to’ was evident in the amount of effort the students put into the readings in this study as well, with some parts – like charts they did not like – not being read at all. They also felt entitled to topics that were of interest to them.

3A: The examiners are the one who should ..uh.. choose the topics.. to get the interest of the examiner [examinee] ... They must put in articles with an interesting photo or an interesting title.

3B: I think you must be interest in reading but it’s not in the IELTS exam

Students suggested examiners should include passages with topics they have some background in. Examiners should also include an element of the ‘weird’ in the reading to make the passage interesting to them:

1A: It's just something that is ... weird that is different. That I know... I know... I have a background about...

This discourse of 'Entitlement' is acknowledged by many in the UAE and arises from the overindulgence of parents and teachers alike. Although newspapers are not an academic source, they are useful in that they are indicative of popular discourses. The following article from *The National* identifies the very same discourse to which I am referring:

Some locals behave like spoilt children who have the "I want" syndrome. Experts say that parents indulge their children and excuse them from taking responsibility, creating a sense of entitlement with no duties or contributions.

"I think it starts at home and how families teach young Emiratis about their role in life, their work ethic and that nobody owes them anything," says the consultant Al Awadhi. "The world doesn't owe them anything, they have to go out and make their way in the world." (Al Jawi, 2011)

The high school system exacerbates the indulgence of the students by acquiescing to their wants as well. Students who have families with influence (termed *wasta*), often use their influence in the school system and on teachers to get what they want. Although this has not been well documented – I was told it was a sensitive issue by a prominent researcher in the UAE- , it has been confirmed by many of my own students who cite the need for their high school teachers to keep their jobs at any cost. When students come to university, however, they find instructors and professors from outside the region who do

not bend under the pressure to indulge students. This often comes as a surprise to our students who are used to wielding their influence and power.

This discourse of ‘Entitlement’ is also a result of the government’s generous distribution of wealth to a relatively small Emirati population. Government money is lavishly spent on a variety of social programmes including housing, education, health services, and government job creation. The budget for 2013 consists of 51% for social spending and 22% for education spending – for a total allocation of 73% of the budget to the welfare of the local population (Basit, 2012). According to the Index of Economic Freedom (2013), an increase in spending occurred during the ‘Arab Spring’ by a 1.6 billion dollar investment in infrastructure, signalling that one reason for the UAE government’s generosity is linked to quelling any potential social unrest.

The discourse of ‘Entitlement’ that students bring to university plays a role in the negative experiences students face while taking the IELTS examination. Not only has this discourse limited the kind of topics they have been exposed to, but the discourse has also created an unrealistic expectation that the examination is tailored to their needs and interests. Students now have to confront topics they have refused to engage with earlier on in their education- with their boredom no longer a factor taken into consideration. They find themselves struggling with the readings as a result. This discourse of ‘Entitlement’, then, is partially responsible for bringing forth the experiences at the level of the empirical.

**Agency** The students draw on the afore-mentioned structural and cultural domains when they are faced with a topic of no interest to them on the IELTS reading

examination. Their high school curriculum and their sense of entitlement interact to allow for the emergence of the negative experiences expressed at the level of the empirical.

**Experience 6:           The vocabulary is too difficult, making it hard to understand passage**

**The Empirical**

One of the students' major complaints about academic reading is not only the length or density of the passages but the level of vocabulary found within. In my personal experience with students, they tend to get stuck in readings when they face difficult vocabulary – often derailing the entire reading process – despite having taught students various coping strategies. It came as no surprise, then, when some of the students in this focus group study voiced their concern about the vocabulary they encountered in the IELTS readings, believing that easier vocabulary made for easier reading.

1A: ...I don't have the concept... for example... here... vocabulary words like  
... yeah... different words...

3A: These academic words and specific words for this kind of thing we may not know

1A: ... it was hard to get... or maybe I just don't know the vocabulary

1C: ...it has more academic words so it's more time... you have to deeply concentrate  
... I think examiners try to trick...the students... so they put...difficult words

5C: Words get more technical in every passage

2C: We need to figure out the... what... like the synonyms

1D: Some passages have ... eh... scientific concepts which we cannot understand  
And there are lots of words...

1E: If you know the phrases and synonyms, you can find it easily

### **The Actual**

The feelings expressed by the students on the level of vocabulary found on the IELTS examination emerge from their experience of reading three IELTS texts in one hour. Each text, which is academic in nature, ranges from 750 to 1000 words. The vocabulary within these texts was related to a variety of topics (see experience 4 and 5 in this chapter for more details).

### **The Real**

The above experiences of difficulty and frustration with the vocabulary can be traced back to the absence of free reading in the students' lives and to the belief that vocabulary knowledge is the most important determiner of success in reading.

**Structure** As mentioned earlier, the students in this study face limited exposure to reading both at home and school. These **structures of home and school** have already been addressed in detail in this chapter and need not be reiterated again here. But a few words need to be said about the literacy practice of free reading – a structure unto itself.

**Free Reading** The absence of free reading – a distinct literacy practice – is partially responsible for the experiences the students record at the level of the empirical. Krashen (2004) refers to the literacy practice of reading for pleasure as Free Voluntary

Reading (FVR). The act of free reading (where students read anything that interests them) aids in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Krashen (2004) claims that students who regularly partake in FVR “will find difficult, academic-style texts easier to read” and will improve their vocabulary (p X). According to McKeown, Beck, Omanson, and Perfetti (1983), numerous research has shown that the vocabulary knowledge gained through the direct teaching of lexis does not necessarily translate into better reading comprehension on the side of the learners whereas FVR has been shown to increase both.

With only 22% of the Emirati population describing themselves as regular readers (Al Yacoub, 2012), it is clear that only a few of the students who come to the IELTS test will have had any form of FVR. This would hold true for this study as well and would suggest that out of the 21 students interviewed, only 4 could be classified as regular readers partaking in the practice of FVR.

**Language** The level of language students bring to the IELTS examination is also a structure that is responsible for the emergence of the experiences at the empirical. The average score of a candidate sitting the examination in the UAE on the IELTS reading component in the year 2011 was a band 4.8, compared to much higher bands for German and French candidates (IELTS Researchers, 2012). Although the IELTS organization does not indicate the level of vocabulary needed to process the reading texts, most IELTS vocabulary websites indicate the first 4000 words of the General Service List as a sufficient target. This is supported by Francis & Kucera (1982) who claim 4000 words provide text coverage of 86.8%. Although I was unable to find any studies on UAE students and their average vocabulary size as they enter university, my professional

guess is it is similar to the vocabulary deficit found in the Omani secondary school students (Cobb & Horst, 2001).

**Culture** Many students cite their difficulty with the vocabulary as being one of the main reasons for not understanding the text or being unable to answer the questions.

Two examples of this are:

1A: ... it was hard to get... or maybe I just don't know the vocabulary

1E: If you know the phrases and synonyms, you can find it easily

This discourse of the 'Importance of Vocabulary' appears to supersede all other aspects related to reading comprehension. This attitude is therefore partially responsible for the feelings the students experience at the level of the empirical.

**Discourse of the 'Importance of Vocabulary'** According to Al Neyadi (2007), the main techniques employed in the teaching of vocabulary in UAE classrooms are memorizing lists of vocabulary and intensive oral drilling. This confirms my personal experience with students preparing for the IELTS examination who try to memorize a list of difficult words to embed in their speech and written work on test day. Vocabulary building is important because a lower level of vocabulary has been linked, in some studies, to lower text comprehension in English language learners (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). This belief system seems to be rooted in our students' psyche along with memorization being the best way to learn vocabulary.

Krashen (2004) does not argue with the importance of vocabulary in reading comprehension but he does take issue with *how* vocabulary is learned. Krashen (2004) claims vocabulary learned in isolation, like the memorization of a word list – something very common here – , does little for the recognition and understanding of the words in context. The students' belief that vocabulary is the most important factor in successfully understanding the IELTS texts, then, is partially responsible for the observations of frustration made at the level of the empirical. Students have learned vocabulary two ways: one by in-context teaching in the IELTS classrooms in our foundation programme and two by memorizing word lists on their own. Despite all their efforts to memorize vocabulary, students reach the IELTS examination unable to understand significant vocabulary items and their synonyms.

1A: ... I don't have a concept... I don't know the concept... vocabulary words

4E: ... yeah... a little hard when they use the synonyms

1E: ...yeah... use synonyms

When a passage contains vocabulary they are familiar with, students view the passage as easy to comprehend:

2B: ... there is no hard vocabulary to understand so it's easy to figure out...

1E: If you know the phrases and synonyms, you can find it easily

Because students hold the belief that knowing the vocabulary equates to doing well on the test, they lose hope and get frustrated easily when faced with words they do not know. Students need to be made aware that there are other belief systems out there that contradict the notion of the all-importance of vocabulary. Strategies and syntactical knowledge, for example, play an important role in reading comprehension as well. A study conducted by Shiotsu (2003), for instance, found that syntactical knowledge played a bigger role in reading test performance than lexical knowledge did. In an earlier study, Berman (1984) found heavy sentence structure hampered a reader's ability to process a text as well.

**Agency** The feelings of frustration that the students voice with the vocabulary at the level of the empirical emerge from the level of the real in two ways: the structure of no free voluntary reading practice and the discourse of an overinflated 'Importance of Vocabulary'. The students draw on the above structural and cultural domains when faced with the vocabulary found on the IELTS reading examination.

### **Experience 7:           There is not enough time**

#### **The Empirical**

The time needed to read and process a passage in order to answer comprehension questions has, according to students in my classes, rarely ever been appropriate. When I give the students all the time they need, I find some students get done well before others. Even though this variety exists, almost all the students in the focus group of this study complained about a lack of time and the anxiety this brings with it.

- 1A: ... we don't have enough time for the third one
- 3A: ... I didn't even have the time to...
- 1A: ... no more time for you to think about it... with a small amount of time, you will  
freak out
- 4B: ... I take much time to read this passage
- 2B: ... it will take a long time
- 7B: ...[I feel ] as they feel
- 2B: It's difficult for us because it's the 3<sup>rd</sup> passage and there is no time..
- 7B: Yeah... I couldn't read at all
- 2B: And sometimes when you are afraid, you give up... there is no time and you are  
nervous, you can't read.
- 1C: ... has more academic words so it's more time... you have to deeply  
concentrate... so it's need time to be solved
- 3C: I think we need more time to do
- 5C: We never really had the chance...[to complete passage 3]
- M: You need more time?
- Mix: Yes...yeah
- 1C: Maybe 2 hours... 2 hours each
- 4D: I agree with that... it took a long time.
- M: You missed two [questions]? Why?
- 2D: Because of the time

4D: I missed a lot of them ... the timing and the long passage

3D: I think the time...

4E: I didn't have the time...uh.. much time to understand the paragraph

1E: There is no time to do that

### **The Actual**

The experiences the students describe of not having enough time to complete the reading section of the IELTS examination emerge from the one hour time limit assigned to the test. Three academic type texts varying between 750 to 1000 words need to be completed along with 40 questions in sixty minutes. This allows for no more than 20 minutes per reading passage.

### **The Real**

**Structure** The above experiences come from students' previous experiences with reading assessment at school as well as the discourse that 'Time is Fluid'.

**School Assessment** As mentioned earlier, the students' high school assessment of reading consisted mainly of multiple choice questions:

1D: In high school mainly our...uh.... English reading exams was .... the question was...all multiple... multiple choice

The assessment not only differed in question type but also in passage length and number as is evidenced by student comments:

1A: You know... there was a lot of information

1E: Sometimes the ... uh... paragraph is too long, three paragraphs [texts] in the exam is too much

3A: ... when I first saw how many paragraphs there were, I was shocked because this is the first time I have reading for IELTS, 3 readings

Had the students' previous school assessment of reading been similar with regards to the time constraints and length and number of reading passages, they would not have expressed shock and dismay to the same degree as they did at the level of the empirical.

When a content analysis was done of the focus group study transcripts to check the frequency of the mentioning of 'time as a concern', it was recorded 32 times. When asked how much time would be appropriate for the reading portion of the test, one student suggested 2 hours be given instead of the currently allotted 1 hour.

Although no information is available on the specifics of the reading assessment done at government high schools in the UAE, there is information available on the Common Educational Proficiency Assessment (CEPA) examination which is used for placement purposes for post-secondary educational institutes at the completion of high school in the UAE. This examination, like the IELTS, consists of 3 texts but the length of each is no more than 400 words (rather than 700 – 1000 words) with a total of 25

multiple choice questions (in comparison to the 40 various kinds in IELTS) as indicated by CEPA (2011). Students get 45 minutes to complete the reading section of the test, which - given the question types and text lengths – is far more generous than the IELTS examination. To illustrate the difference in the high school assessment and the IELTS, a typical example of a CEPA reading examination passage follows:

### **CEPA Reading 2.2**

In recent years, health professionals have been urging people to take up exercise and sport for all of the health benefits exercise has to offer, and increasing numbers of people of all ages have begun to heed this advice. However, an increase in physical activity, while intended as a health benefit, can also increase the likelihood of injury. Whether it is a sprained ankle or a broken leg, there is nothing more frustrating than watching your team-mates from the sidelines or having to stop your daily gym workout.

While some sports injuries are unavoidable, most can be treated effectively. Most people who suffer injuries can return to a satisfying level of physical activity afterwards. Even better, many injuries can be prevented if people take the proper precautions. Not overdoing exercise, training properly, and warming up properly are all important ways of reducing the risk of injury.

Warming up before every training session and competition helps to increase blood flow to the muscles. This means the muscles and surrounding tissues can move with more freedom. Warm ups should begin with easy aerobic activity - for example, jogging for five to ten minutes - followed by gentle stretching exercises. The aim of this part of the warm-up is to stretch the muscles and joints, making them more flexible and less likely to tear. It is particularly important to stretch each of the main muscle groups that will be used in training or competition. A butterfly swimmer, for example, should stretch their shoulder, back and neck muscles. Each stretch should last for ten to fifteen seconds. The whole warm up routine should last between ten and fifteen minutes.

Cooling down at the end of a training session or competition also helps to avoid injuries. It does this by helping the body dispose of waste products that have built up in the muscles while exercising or playing. The cool-down involves the same steps as the warm-up - light aerobic exercise and gentle stretching. Following these simple steps at the beginning and end of the exercise session is one way to ensure that injuries are avoided.

Sources: <http://cultureuae.wikispaces.com/file/view/cepa+reading+2.2.pdf>

This passage clearly shows a distinctive difference in length between the assessment used towards the end of high school and the assessment used to get into university programmes (the IELTS), with 351 words for the high school passage and 700 – 1000 words for the IELTS passage, making the latter double in length with very little extra time allotted for processing. This difference makes the high school assessment of reading a structure that contributes to the feelings experienced by students at the level of the empirical.

**Culture** The experience of ‘not enough time’ expressed by students taking the IELTS examination also emerges from the discourse of time being viewed as fluid and flexible.

**The Discourse of ‘Time is Fluid’** The concept of time is cultural. How time is perceived, used to structure daily life, and overall ‘understood’ varies from culture to culture (Kartari, 1997). By some societies, like the US and Germany, time is considered a “precious, even scarce, commodity” (Lewis, 2006, p. 53). Other cultures view time as more fluid and more forgiving, bordering on endless. The UAE falls into the latter

category of time perception, in line with the traditional Arab philosophy of people and relationships being more important than any schedule (Riel, 2011). Students in the UAE are raised with a loose concept of time, often prompting them to arrive to class five to ten minutes late on a regular basis. Although there no documented evidence of this, in my experience ‘time’ – like so much else in UAE society - is ‘negotiated’ between students and teachers with regards to assignments and tests. The students in this study then take their concept of fluidity of time to the IELTS examination and find that by the time they get to the third reading, they are out of time:

M: Ok... anything else you would like to add about that one? Reading passage 3, some of you said you ran out of time.

Mix: Yeah. Yeah

M: Anyone?

5A: No...

M: You all ran out of time?

1A: Maybe... I (laughter)

3A: I didn't even read

5A: I did only 3 questions

1A: Yeah... me too

This time concern speaks to Street's Ideological Model (1993) of reading as it matches the concept that literacy practice is affected by cultural context. Emirati students,

however, are not alone in the complaint of lack of time. Hawkey's (2005) study revealed that the 28% of surveyed IELTS candidates who felt the examination was unfair cited time pressure as a significant reason, second only to opposition to tests in general. These 28% represent a mix of nationalities, indicating that not everyone who complained probably held a similar discourse to time.

**Agency** When confronted with the restrictive time on the IELTS reading examination, students in this study drew on the structural and cultural domains mentioned above. The students' past experiences with reading assessment coupled with their discourse of 'Time as Fluid' interacted to bring forth the emergence of the feelings of 'not enough time' at the level of the empirical.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusions

The IELTS approach is recognised as being fair, reliable and valid to all candidates, whatever their nationality, cultural background, gender or special needs. The test questions are developed by a network known as the IELTS item writers in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK and the US. They are based on real life sources (for example, advertisements, books, newspapers and company policies), so ensuring that they are always fit for purpose.

Source: [http://www.ielts.org/test\\_takers\\_information/what\\_is\\_ielts/why\\_choose\\_ielts.aspx](http://www.ielts.org/test_takers_information/what_is_ielts/why_choose_ielts.aspx)

#### 7.1 Findings

It is the above claim that culture and nationality of candidates do not affect performance on an IELTS examination coupled with my students' concerns of cultural bias that prompted the undertaking of this study. The two belief systems – that of the IELTS organization and that of Emirati examinees - seemed to be at odds, meriting a closer look at the examination. To make the study manageable, the reading component of the examination was the only part investigated – both quantitatively through a content analysis and qualitatively through the eyes of our Emirati students in the form of a focus group study.

The findings of this case study do not support the claim of cultural neutrality expressed by the IELTS organization. The findings are in line with the New Literacy Studies, in particular Street's Ideological Model of Literacy (1993), which contend that literacy is embedded in one's social environment and part of one's social identity. This perspective of literacy clashes with the one embraced by the IELTS organization as the latter appears to draw on the autonomous model of literacy where reading is viewed as a neutral act. This model views the act of reading as applying a set of neutral skills to

texts. Moreover, with the academic world viewed as a global entity, the argument can be made that prospective members of this world (ie. those who are taking the academic version of the IELTS examination) need to demonstrate mastery of this kind of literacy if they wish to succeed in academic study. The IELTS examination, however, is not written by an equal representation of academic perspectives from around the world but rather from an English socio-cultural perspective since the test writers are from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US (see above quote from IELTS). The texts written by the IELTS writers, therefore, are socio-cultural products (Fairclough, 2001) which promote the world views of the writers. This means the 'power' lies with this specific socio-cultural group. This begs the question of what happens when people excluded from this specific group of people (due to differing socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds) encounter the texts of this powerful group. Fairclough (2001) contends that miscommunication and inequality is the result. One way to counteract this, perhaps, is to allow for a greater diversity in the text writers. But would the power-holders be open to this diversity given that 'power over discourse' is a commanding tool for holding on to one's power in the first place (Fairclough, 2001)?

This research study took a closer look at how the IELTS examination led to experiences of cultural bias on the part of Emirati students. It also investigated what Emirati students experienced as cultural bias and the conditions from which these emerged. The main research question and the two sub-questions were answered through a detailed content analysis and a focus group study.

The content analysis of 20 reading examinations - equaling 60 reading passages-

revealed that, on average, one examination held close to 14 cultural references. Of those, there were around 6 related to cultural objects, 4 related to politics or historical settings, 1 related to social roles, 1 related to proverbs or idiomatic expressions, and 1 related to belief systems. No references were found related to cultural traditions or festivals.

The geographical analysis also revealed statistics in opposition to the IELTS claim of fairness to all nationalities and cultural groups. The analysis of the 60 reading passages showed that 65% of all locations mentioned in the readings related to the West with much smaller percentages for the rest of the world. References to locations in Asia stood at 17% while those in South America were at 10%. The least number of references occurred for Africa and the Middle East, each at 4%, and the Caribbean at 1%. From this data, it is clear that the writers of the test exercised their agency to draw on a cultural domain which was familiar to them but unfamiliar to our students. They were drawing on the assumption – a discourse in the domain of culture at the level of the real - that ‘their understanding of the world’ was similar to those of the many different cultural groups sitting the examination. Perhaps the test designers were also drawing on the assumption that globalization – a structure at the level of the real - had already spread their ‘understanding’ of the world to all corners of the world. This idea could be attributed to the structure of the English language at the level of the real and its sudden international appeal in the past century. No other language in the history of mankind has been as rapid in its expansion or as broad in its scope as the English language (Crystal, 2003). Whereas a language used to become dominant due to military or political might, the English language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and onward has been “maintained and promoted almost

single-handedly through the economic supremacy of the new American power” (Crystal, 2003, p. 10). The structure of the English language as well as the structure of globalization along with the assumptions found in the cultural domain at the level of the real lead to the experiences of cultural bias found at the level of the empirical.

The five examinations the students sat in this study underwent a syntactical analysis to determine grammatical difficulty. The analysis found that each examination, on average, had 92 clauses and 50 passive voice formations with no pattern of even distribution amongst the three passages. This is pertinent as it relates to the students’ complaints in the focus group of the text being too long and difficult for them at the level of the empirical. This experience emerges from the realm of the real, in particular from the structure of the lack of reading at home and at school and from the discourse in the cultural domain of the ‘Unimportance of Reading’. The reason for this level of difficulty lies with the IELTS examination’s aim to mirror the academic reading difficulty found at English medium universities in the West. The test writers are drawing on the assumption (a discourse in the cultural domain at the level of the real) of what students *should* encounter at university. Students at KU, however, have not had enough contact with this type of heavy reading since they have not been exposed to this kind of reading at home or in high school. The students then draw on their previous testing and reading experiences they view as ‘academic’ and their language capabilities (both structures at the level of the real) to deal with the unfamiliar academic text at the level of the actual. The students’ concept of what constitutes an ‘academic text’ is different to the concept of the IELTS writers’ because of differing socio-cultural contexts. This should come as no surprise

since language, according to Halliday and other systemic functional linguists (Eggins, 2004), is semiotic in nature. This means that the person producing the language act/text (ie. the test writer) uses his/her agency (at the level of the real) to make choices in regards to tone, register, syntactic structure, lexis and so on in order to create meaning (event in the actual). The meanings that are created, therefore, result from intentional selection and are guided by the purpose of the interaction itself and social and cultural conventions (at the level of the real) related to said interaction. The language choices that are made in interactions therefore reflect the producer's ideological position and values. In the case of the IELTS writers and our students, this translates into a collision of cultures. Whereas the writers have a given ideological position on what qualities an academic text should have and how it should be written, the students at KU also have theirs. Consequently, when students encounter the text (event at the level of the actual), the encounter allows for the experience of cultural bias to emerge at the level of the empirical.

The question analysis revealed further cultural concerns with 20 out of 40 questions involving some form of higher order thinking. At the level of the empirical, this translates into complaints of question difficulty. The reasons for this can be found at the level of the real in both the structural domain and the cultural domain. For one, the structure of the students' high school assessment did not lend itself to answers requiring critical thought as it promoted literal questions and text memorization. The structure of religion also plays into the emergence of the students' experiences since they are not allowed to question or even interpret their holy text on their own. Secondly, students hold a discourse of 'Obedience' which does not allow for the questioning of things in general.

The reinterpretation of textual components is an integral part of the critical thought needed for half of the IELTS questions that students encounter on the reading examination, yet our Emirati students have had very little practice with this type of literacy – something the IELTS writers are assuming is not the case (a discourse in the cultural domain at the level of the real). For example, the most common question type found on the examination was the rethinking matching question at 9.8 per examination. The second most common question type was the rethinking fill in the blank question at 6.3 per examination. The other most common question types were literal in nature and consisted of the yes/no question at 5.5 per examination and the multiple choice question at 2.5 per examination, the latter of which was the type of question the students in the study were used to from high school. Any kind of rethinking question is a form of reinterpretation and translates into the need for higher order thinking. Again, systemic functional linguistics explains the reason why the examination tests the way that it does. The writers of the examination hold a social and cultural viewpoint (emerging from the domain of culture at the level of the real) of what kinds of questions should be attached to academic texts. Whereas the students' socio-cultural contexts have allowed for more literal questioning, the writers' socio-cultural contexts favour a different type – that of higher order thinking. This allows for the emergence of cultural bias at the level of the empirical on behalf of the students.

When retroduction was applied to the content analysis and syntactical analysis findings, structures and discourses at the level of the real were identified as generative mechanisms. Amongst these were the structures of school curricula, school assessment,

religion, and lack of reading culture. Discourses in the domain of culture at the level of the real included such things as the ‘Unimportance of Reading’, the ‘Unimportance of the un-Islamic’, and the ‘Sense of Entitlement’ to name but a few. These structures and discourses overlapped with the ones in the focus group findings where the students expressed a number of common experiences, mainly of frustration with and disinterest in the IELTS examination. These negative feelings were retroducted to various structures and discourses in the realm of the real, sometimes repetitively so. The students expressed the following feelings a number of times:

1. I hate reading; it’s hard
2. The questions are too difficult
3. The passages are too long and difficult
4. The topics are unfamiliar; should be familiar
5. The topics are not interesting; should be interesting
6. The vocabulary is too difficult making it hard to understand the passage
7. There is not enough time

The above experiences at the realm of the empirical emerged due to the structures and discourses at play in the realm of the real. Structures included, but were not limited to, those of school (curriculum, teachers’ pedagogy, library resources, nationality and training of teachers, assessment) home, religion, and literacy practices. Discourses included belief systems of the ‘Unimportance of Reading’ as well as ‘the ‘Acceptance of the Written Word’. Other discourses that brought forth the emergence of the students’ experiences revolved around the culture of ‘Obedience’ and the rejection of the ‘un-

Islamic'. The discourse of the 'Importance of Vocabulary' in successful reading comprehension also created the negative experiences observed at the realm of the empirical. The discourse of 'Entitlement' played a role in the emergence as well, as did the students' discourse of 'Time is Fluid'.

When all of the above findings from the content analysis to the focus group retroductions are added up, it is unmistakable that the structural and cultural conditions in which the candidate exercises agency can influence his/her experience of the IELTS examination. This, then, calls into question the IELTS organization's claim to the contrary – in particular with regards to students sitting the examination in the UAE for entry into UAE universities and colleges. However, it also needs to be acknowledged that the IELTS examination was never intended to be used as an entrance requirement for university study in non-English speaking countries. It was originally designed to serve as a proficiency examination to indicate the readiness of students to take on academic study in such countries as Australia, England, Ireland, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. This could easily explain the high number of western references on the test. One interesting point to investigate here is whether or not the test actually does what it is intended to do. A study conducted on 113 students confirmed that the IELTS examination had predictive validity in reading only: "The reading test was found to be the only significant predictor of academic performance" (Kerjstens & Nery, 2000, p. 86). Feast (2002) confirms these findings as well, stating that a positive relationship was found between overall IELTS scores and subsequent university performance.

The use of the examination, then, for the purpose of academic study in English at English-speaking universities in English-speaking countries appears to be appropriate with regards to predictive validity. This matches the claims of the IELTS organization which has its own validation procedures, as mentioned earlier. With regards to the reading examination, the IELTS pre-tests its reading passages on students before final choices for the examination are made. This validation process is only valid, however, if those students genuinely reflect the true nature of the students sitting the examination. If students on whom the reading examination is pre-tested are already academically literate, then they do not reflect the true nature of the students taking the test in the UAE. However, if the reason for sitting the examination is to study overseas in an academically literate English-speaking environment, then the test appears to hold true to its nature. On the other hand, if the test is used for any other purpose than what it was intended for, its use becomes problematic. At first glance, one might think the test appropriate for use at any college or institution that uses English as its medium of instruction. But this is not necessarily true.

Take the reading component as an example. Universities in the UAE generally do not expect students to read their textbooks even though textbooks are distributed to the students:

“I don’t assume in either of my classes that students are...reading the material. Before, I used to assume that. It was expected...But, now, I structure classes based on that, that students have not...read the chapter or the material...”  
(Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2005, p. 10).

Often the faculty courses are watered down to accommodate the language abilities and the literacy practices of the students at the universities (Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2005). As a result, students tend to memorize the slides from their lectures rather than read their academic textbooks for test study. If success on the test does not require the reading of the textbook, then the possible washback effect of this would be no use of the textbook in class or out of class. According to Alderson & Wall (1993), the influence of a test can have both negative and positive effects in the classroom. In this case, the non-use of the textbook impacts negatively on the students in the UAE as they are never really exposed to what one could term ‘authentic western academic texts’.

One could argue that academic study is academic study regardless of where it occurs. My personal experience has shown otherwise, however. Ten years of teaching in the region has afforded me a better glimpse into the higher education system in the UAE. Professors and lecturers are stunned by the difference in academic ability and language skills of the students they taught in the West versus the students they teach here. Sonleitner & Khelifa’s (2005) focus group study confirmed this sentiment numerous times especially with regards to watering down content:

“One difference in teaching here compared to teaching [before] is that I have to make things simpler”, “... Someone told us in our orientation that we might cover a third of what we would cover in [his previous university]. And, I found that to be accurate. So far, about a third, I’m simplifying [information in textbook chapters] for them and putting it on Power Point presentation...I’m boiling things down, down, down...” (p. 9).

This shows the students at higher educational institutions in the UAE to be completely different to that of their western counterparts with entirely different academic and language abilities because they draw on different conditions in the domains of culture and structure at the level of the real.

The following question begs to be asked as a result: If students do not need to have the literacy practices that the IELTS examination tests for – since the textbooks are not being read and the material is simplified for students -, then what is the point of using the test as an entrance requirement for university study? Moreover, Khalifa University is an engineering university with students primarily taking classes in mathematics, physics, and engineering. The IELTS examination does include some engineering related articles in the reading section but, for the most part, articles tend to be from other disciplines. Out of the 60 passages examined in this study, only three matched our students' science and engineering majors. If the topics do not match our students' majors and the syntax and density of the reading texts do not match our students' experiences here at Khalifa University, then the suitability of the IELTS examination for entrance into Khalifa University programmes needs to be re-examined.

## **7.2 Limitations of Study**

This study, like any other, has its limitations. Firstly, the study involved a limited number of students from one foundation programme; twenty-one to be exact. Compared to how many candidates sit the examination annually in the UAE, this is a minuscule number. Consequently, the experiences of the few cannot be generalized to the greater

population of candidates in the UAE. The content analysis consisted of a limited number of IELTS examinations as well. Ideally, more than twenty examinations would have been analyzed but with each examination taking many hours to complete, the task would have been unmanageable for one examiner. Thus, the results of the twenty were averaged out. The subjectivity of the content analysis is also a limitation. Personal judgement was needed for many of the categorizations. Even though a number of colleagues weighed in on the analysis to triangulate the data, in the end the task was still relatively subjective in nature.

To sum up, the study was a ‘snapshot’ of one group’s experience of the IELTS examination. The study was not designed to be used for generalizable purposes but rather to shed light on what and why students experience what they say they do.

### **7.3 Future Research**

This research looked at the cultural bias of the reading component of the IELTS examination through a content analysis and a focus group study filling a gap in the research on a high stakes examination. Future research is needed to see if other cultural groups have similar experiences on the reading part of the IELTS examination. Since only research into the matter of cultural bias has been touched on in speaking, the listening and the writing components of the examination need further investigation as well.

With regards to the UAE, a number of studies were found to be absent with regards to reading. Questions as to how much students read, what students read, when students read, why students read, and how often students read need further study. Students' high school experiences of reading, their reading texts, and their reading assessment need further investigation as well.

Overall, the lack of current research in reading in the UAE coupled with the lack of research on cultural bias of the other components of the IELTS examination makes for a plethora of future research opportunities - especially from the critical realist and social realist perspective which affords the researcher the opportunity to explore IELTS validation claims – such as the one at the beginning of this chapter- through an entirely different lens. The use of this particular framework is valuable since it looks at the examination and its validity from a unique angle, thereby yielding possibly unexpected results.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Assent**

#### **Statement of Purpose**

This research is being conducted to determine if there is a perception of cultural bias on the reading components of the IELTS exam by examinees. This research is part of a Ph.D. dissertation for Rhodes University, South Africa.

#### **Expected Duration**

This research will last no more than 2 hours.

#### **Description of Procedures**

Participants will do the reading component of an IELTS exam and then participate in a short group discussion led by the investigator.

#### **Risks**

There are no risks associated with this research. Students can opt out at any time.

#### **Benefits**

The benefit to the participants is exam practice for the IELTS as well as the chance to air their opinions on the exam.

#### **Subject's Responsibilities**

Participants are expected to sit the exam and work quietly for the first hour after which they are to partake in a recorded group discussion on the readings, the topics, and the difficulty of the questions.

#### **Maintenance of Confidentiality**

Each participant will be assigned a number as an identity. This number is meant to provide confidentiality for the participant. The research will not refer to a name but only a number. The link between the name and the number will be securely stored via password protection on the computer at KU and destroyed upon acceptance of research at Rhodes University.

**Access to records for subjects and REC**

Participants have immediate access to their coded records. The REC has to ask for permission from the investigator first.

**Name and Contact Details of person to contact**

Hilda Freimuth, Khalifa University  
PO Box 127788, Abu Dhabi, UAE  
[Hilda.freimuth@kustar.ac.ae](mailto:Hilda.freimuth@kustar.ac.ae)  
050 331 0462

**Statement of Subject's Rights**

Every participant has the right to change his/her mind with regards to participation during the two hour research study. The subject also has the right to withdraw his/her data from the research study up until the data is transcribed and analyzed. Once the data has been collected and analyzed, it will not be used for any future research.

**DECLARATION**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, understand the above information and agree to participate in this **voluntary** study. There is no compensation for participating in this study. Should I change my mind or refuse to participate at any time during the research study, I understand there will be no penalty or loss of benefits involved with the withdrawal.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**  
**Information Sheet**

Code: \_\_\_\_\_

**Research Project: Participant Information**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Section: \_\_\_\_\_

Male: \_\_\_\_\_ Female: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ GPA: \_\_\_\_\_

From: Abu Dhabi Dubai Sharjah

RAK Fujairah Ajman

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Education: Public School in Arabic

Public School in English

Private School in Arabic

Private School in English

Have you studied English in another country? Yes No

Have you travelled to English speaking countries? Yes No

If so, where to and for how long? \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C**  
**General Questions for Interviews**

- 1) Can you tell me about the readings?
- 2) How do you feel about the readings?
- 3) How do you feel about the topics and questions on the exam?

## Appendix D Focus Group Transcriptions

### Group A Transcription

- Moderator: Welcome. Now you just finished the readings of Book 7 Test 2 and this is a real IELTS test. They don't use it anymore but you...just... it is the readings from an IELTS test from before, ok? Can you tell me about the readings?
- 1A: Um...well I guess that the readings were ...some of them were hard the other were quite good. Um... the first one, for me, it was easy to read it and maybe to understand most of it...
- Moderator: The Pagoda one, yes?
- 1A: Yeah. The pedagoda... what?
- Moderator: Pagoda
- 1A: Pagoda, yeah um...but...as much as it easy was when I was ... when I was...reading it, it was hard for me to decide which one is for the Japanese and which one is for the Chinese, you know.
- Moderator: Ok.
- 1A: Yeah, so that the passage was good but the question, the questions were tricky.
- Moderator: Which...which.... Go to your questions now.. and tell me which ones... how you felt ... you said they were tricky. How did you feel about the questions with regards to the Japanese pagoda?
- 1A: See here... questions from 5 to 10..
- Moderator: Right...those are RAC questions.
- 1A: Yup
- Moderator: Ok.
- 1A: Uhh... it was a bit confusing because it is not literally in the passage...
- Moderator: Right...
- 1A: And I have to understand it in my own way..
- Moderator: Exactly... yes.
- 1A: And I don't have a concept.. I don't know the concept...
- Moderator: What concept don't you have? Concept of what?
- 1A: Uh... for example... here... vocabulary words like ...
- 3A: Eaves
- 1A: Eaves and... where?
- 3A: Interior
- 1A: Where?... interior...interior access
- Moderator: Ok
- 1A: Um...it might be quite easy but when you read it from the past... from the passage... it's different.
- Moderator: Right. Now why do you think it is different?
- 1A: Ummm
- Moderator: Different words? ... you mean...

- 1A: Yeah, different words.  
 3A: It's indirect way.  
 Moderator: Indirect way? Ok... of saying... now you were talking about some concepts – Chinese vs Japanese  
 1A: Yeah  
 Moderator: Can you explain that a little more? Why that... You say that was difficult?  
 1A: See here... in the 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph, I guess..  
 Moderator: Ahum...  
 1A: Yeah.. they was...they were saying... ah... here.. “however the instructures was fairly adapted to local condition”... ah... they were built less higher typical (unclear...). You know... there was... there was a lot of informations but when you come to the question  
 Moderator: Ahum  
 1A: It's quite difficult to know what do they want exactly.  
 Moderator: Ok  
 1A: They have a lot of information there, but here (pointing to the question) it is just so simple.  
 Moderator: Ok. Now do you guys agree with that? Do you have any feelings about the first reading and the questions?  
 3A: Umm... when I first saw how many paragraphs there were, I was shocked because this is the first time I have reading for IELTS, 3 readings... ah... afterwards and umm... when I read it was ok and it took me a lot of time than I thought it would take but when I came to the questions, it was somehow tricky... but I think I did well on the questions.  
 Moderator: Ok.  
 1A: Yeah, it was better than the second one and the third one.  
 Moderator: You know that they are organized from easy to difficult to most difficult, did you know that?  
 3A: Yeah.  
 Moderator: The first one is the easiest, the second one is supposed to be harder, and the third one is supposed to be the hardest. Do you feel that is the case with this reading, these readings, or no?  
 1A: Yes, I do but the problem is we don't have enough time for the third one.  
 3A: (talking over 1A) I haven't read the third one.  
 1A: Just the first two.  
 Moderator: Ok.  
 1A: So, if they reorder it like...if they put the hardest first, it will maybe become easier for us to answer the third one and we will get better answers... I guess.  
 Moderator: Ok. Ummm... Tell me here in the Pagoda...still reading passage 1... you have yes/no/not given questions, questions 1-4, how did you find those?  
 1A: I guess they were good. I am not sure if I answered them right... but ..ahhh... they are direct, I guess.  
 3A: Yeah

- 5A: ..they were .. than the...
- 3A: easier to find
- Moderator: Right...
- 3A: where the answers are
- Moderator: Those questions are LYN questions – they are literal questions. You found those easier..
- 3A + Moderator: ...to find the answers.
- Moderator: Alright. Anything else you want to say about the..the first reading – the topic or any of the questions? Anything else you would like to...
- 1A: No, it was ok.
- Moderator: Alright... oh.. there were three more questions with regards to that reading – 11, 12, and 13 – they were multiple choice questions...
- 1A: ahum
- 3A: Yeah, they were direct.
- Moderator: They were direct?
- 1A: Yeah.
- Moderator: Alright. Let's move on to the second part... (clears throat) ..the reading passage is called The True Cost of Food... yes?  
(mumbling confirmation)  
(moderator clears throat again)  
... Excuse me. Alright...can you tell me about this reading? What was it like when you were reading this passage? Umm... any feelings? Any comments?
- 5A: The first of passage.. ahh.. it was ok but on the next page I was shocked- what's this?
- Moderator: What's the part you were shocked about?
- 5A: About the number and the cost
- Moderator: Oh... the numbers in the reading..they were confusing you or they were easy?
- 5A: Yes..more confusing..
- 3A: No...they were the opp..it was kind of the opposite for me. When I start reading, I couldn't get the exact point – what is the passage about? But when I went to the second page, I start to get the main idea a little bit more. But I thought it was...like details..everything from the beginning, then they somehow just change some things but it's only talking about the same thing. But they change in some different way... I don't know...
- Moderator: They are changing something in the second..on the second page? These paragraphs are a little bit different than the first page?
- 3A: No... I mean, uhh...at first they talk about food..
- Moderator: Right...
- 3A: Then, they talk about the damages but...after that , afterwards they are talking about the cost...
- Moderator: Ok..

- 3A: ...and they are again talking about the cost.
- Moderator: Yes..
- 3A: And then..like...as if they go back and talk about things from the first page...it's
- Moderator: Right...
- 3A: It's like..
- 1A: Confusing.. from here it was hard to understand
- Moderator: Because they are changing the points? Is it because they are changing the points? Is that what you are saying?
- 3A: Yes. They are going..they are coming back here...
- Moderator: Ok..
- 1A: For example, they said in the first paragraph that the cost of it is one, two, three and then they explain it in different paragraphs and this would be easier but they didn't..they were like...talking about lots of things...and..maybe I didn't understand the formula of the sentence.
- Moderator: Ahum
- 1A: It was difficult for me to get it here...
- 3A: Me too..
- 1A: Passage E.. it cludes... here...
- Moderator: The cost included... this one?
- 1A: Yeah. I wasn't able to understand which number is for what. They were like...after each other... and it was hard to.. to get
- Moderator: You didn't... you couldn't understand because there are too many? Or the order? Or how? ... What was it?
- 1A: Yeah.. too many...the order... they talked here about something (unclear) or maybe I just don't know the vocabulary..
- Moderator: How do you feel? (towards others in group)
- 3A: The exact opposite?
- Moderator: Opposite? The exact opposite? (laughter)
- 3A: Yeah, I think when I start reading paragraph D and E, I actually started to get the.. the main idea of the passage, then I just go back .. I think yeah... this is what? This is this and this is that. (others talking indiscriminately)  
The picture started to get more clear.
- Moderator: Tell me about the topic itself. Is that something you know ... you know about? Or...
- 1A: Yeah, when you read the title... you can imagine what's going to talk about.
- Moderator: Ok
- 1A: But..ah... it was nothing like I expected.
- Moderator: Ok...ok... (light laughter)...let's look at the question formats. Questions 14-17, 18-21 and then in the end, 22-26. Can you tell me about these?  
There are three different kinds of questions there for this reading. How did you feel about them?
- 1A: I guess the hardest one was from 22-26

- 5A: Yeah, the summary..
- Moderator: The summary?
- 1A: Yeah, the summary. Umm... it was hard to find the right word...because we understood the passage, kind of, and here there is a summary, not letter... not letter by letter transferring... so it was difficult to know... to know what they want exactly.
- Moderator: Right..
- 1A: And to find the set word but in a different way to say it.
- 2A: For me, it was the exact opposite. I found the questions 22-26 easier, but the first question, I did not answer it. .. I didn't know why...
- Moderator: Which? Which ones? 14 to 17?
- 2A: Yeah.. 14 to 17.
- Moderator: Ok...choose the letter. Tell me about why you didn't answer that one. What was... Was it difficult? Is that what you are saying?
- 2A: I think, I did..I read.. the passage, I get the idea but it wasn't organized well in my mind so I couldn't figure which ..which one for which paragraph.
- Moderator: So which idea was? You had trouble with that?
- 2A: Yeah.
- Moderator: Which idea matched which paragraph. Is she the only one or are there other people who found that.. challenging?
- 3A: No...uhh...this... these questions were mixed for me. From 22 to 26, some questions I found it easy to find others are not easy to find. I found some trouble with question 18 to 21.
- Moderator: 18 -21... the yes/no/not given?
- 3A: Yes. I found some trouble even though I read this very clearly and I (unclear) as I could in order to find the answers. But questions 14 – 17 was ok.
- Moderator: They were ok?
- 3A: Yeah.
- Moderator: Those were the matching the ideas to the paragraphs...yes
- 3A: Yeah.
- 1A: And they were ok with me too.
- Moderator: 18-21 the yes/no/not given we've labelled them as LYN which means literal yes/no questions. Ummm... you were saying you had some trouble with them... so maybe they were not literal? Do you disagree that they were direct?
- 3A: The question is direct but the problem is I couldn't find the answers..uh... like I said, the ideas in this paragraph I don't know...
- Moderator: Right..
- 3A: It was like here and there...
- Moderator: Ok...yeah
- 3A: ...so it was kind of hard to answer these questions..

- Moderator: Ok... anything else you would like to add about that one? Reading passage 3, some of you said you ran out of time.
- (mix of voices) Yeah. Yeah.
- Moderator: Anyone (unclear)
- 5A: No..
- Moderator: You all ran out of time?
- 1A: Maybe..I (laughter)
- 3A: I didn't even read
- 1A: 27 -30 and maybe I didn't
- 5A: I did only 3 questions
- 1A: Yeah..me too...
- Moderator: Well, let's go through it together quickly and then, we won't read it, and just ask you a couple of questions for the sake of this interview and see how you feel about it. Let's start with the title, yes? Makete Integrated Rural Transport Project.
- 1A: Yeah.
- Moderator: Ok.. so tell me... how do you feel about this title?
- 3A: Umm
- 1A: Not interested.
- Moderator: Not interested? Do you understand what it is going to be about?
- 1A: Maybe about transportation...
- 3A: Something related transportation, they may be trying to build a line or something this guy, is apparently not... I don't know, his name is weird...
- Moderator: Makete? You think it's a man's name?
- (mix of voices garbled)
- Moderator: Is that what you said?
- 3A: Yeah.
- Moderator: Ok.. um... alright..so that's how you feel about...
- (mix of voices garbled)
- Moderator: Do you feel comfortable with this topic.?
- (in unison): No...
- 3A: because of so much... I think it's the....
- 1A: yeah, the longest passage...
- 3A: Comparing this reading to the first and the second is so much...
- Moderator: You are saying this one is longer, yes?
- Mix of voices: Longer and...
- Moderator: But that's not related to the topic... but so you are saying the length is more intimidating... what about the topic itself? You said you didn't like... what were you saying about the topic? You didn't like it?
- 1A: Yeah, I didn't like the topic.
- Moderator: What's with the topic specifically that you don't like?

- 1A: I don't know. Maybe it will contain lots of ...maybe... I don't know...I..not ...Understandable..uh.. words. For example, for transportation and...
- 3A: These academic words and specific words for this kind of thing we may not know and we might find (unclear) ..
- Moderator: So you are finding that...
- 3A: some understanding for this..
- Moderator: ..that the title , you think, indicates that it's a more difficult passage?
- 1A: Yeah...
- Moderator: Than the other ones?
- 1A: Yeah... because of the title?
- Moderator: How do you feel about that?
- 5A: I don't know...
- Moderator: You don't know? (laughter)
- 1A: I guess if they put..ahh...ahh..it's ok for me to read..ah.. an article about ahh..genetic butterfly or anything and I will understand it because ...because when I read the title..I will be interested to know more about it. But..when you. .. when you read 'Makete Integrated (muffled) Transportation Project' you are just...ahhh, what is that?
- Moderator: Yeah.
- 1A: ..what's going to be about? I'm bored.
- Moderator: You're bored already?( laughter)..right...
- 1A: I don't want to read it. If they say, transportation to the moon, maybe ..maybe I will be interested to read it...yeah... The topic will be the same...about transportation... but with more interesting way.
- Moderator: Now with regards to the topics..the 3 topics: the Makete Transport System, The True Cost of Food, and the Japanese Pagodas... right? Do you feel comfortable with these topics? Do you have enough knowledge about these to handle the readings? Or.. how do you feel about that?
- 1A: Maybe the first two... I don't have a knowledge about the first one but the second one..about food, maybe I would have a little – a small background about it...and the...first one is interesting to read because ... you know... the picture and the....
- Moderator: So the picture helps with the..
- 1A: Yeah... to understand.
- Moderator: Ok.  
(talking all at once)
- Moderator: So.. you would never understand the word 'pagoda' ? why? (laughter) without the picture?
- 1A: Yeah. (laughter)
- Moderator: Ok. So the picture helps... tell me, why do you think you don't know much about pagodas? What do you think the reason is for that?
- 3A: Because ...I think from reading it is related to something religious and these kinds of things and ... uhh.. for me I am not so... ok I know things

- about Japan but I don't know things the religion in east Asia, generally....  
So...
- Moderator: But why is that? Is it...
- 1A: But maybe if they put..ahhh.
- 3A: It's not something we are interested in knowing about .
- Moderator: Was it something you studied in school or no?
- (various) : No..no...no
- 1A: If the article was about Burj Khalifa, maybe I'll understand most of it....
- Moderator: Right... rather than a pagoda... (laughter)
- 1A: But if a Chinese student or a Japanese student read this, they would feel that very easy
- Moderator: Right...because?
- 1A: Because they know it..
- Moderator: They know the topic? The pagoda..
- 3A: But I don't think it was hard. I mean... there were....ok there were academic vocab and things we don't understand ..from... but from reading paragraph in the passage we were able to get the idea and... it actually was interesting...like she said.
- 1A: Yeah...
- Moderator: Alright. Let's just quickly look at the last ... the one that you guys didn't do.... The Makete... let's just look at the question types just to get some feedback on that... The first 27-30 questions are a list of headings where you have to match the headings with the paragraphs. Now... you have encountered this in class before...
- 1A: Yeah.
- Moderator: How do you feel about this type of question?
- 1A: First...um... before you teach me of course, ahh. I was...when I read the...the passage..I read every single paragraph but then I come back to ..to read the titles, the headings, and I said "what was I reading about?" Yeah... oh... and then come back to the paragraph and then to the headings. So it is very confusing but when you know how to find the main topic from the first sentence...ah.. it will be easier for you.
- Moderator: You mean the topic sentence in the paragraphs?
- 1A: Yeah.
- Moderator: They help you determine which headings?
- 1A: Yeah...the topic sentence is general about all paragraphs it will be easier to find the headline for...
- 5A: Each paragraph here...has...ah...a lot of headings in the box, so we are confusing which is better to choose and which is the general...ahh.. and what is the .. not the general one and not the specific ones.
- 1A: Yeah... it takes lots of time.
- Moderator: It takes..takes you time... because it is not direct? Is that what you are saying?
- 1A: Yup...we have 1,2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8,9, 10, 11 for

- 5A: I think for...
- 1A: only 1-2-3-4 paragraphs.
- Moderator: Right..
- 5A: I think for each paragraph they put 3 or 2 headings.
- Moderator: Right...right... and that... you find that challenging?
- (in unison) Yeah...yeah... very challenging.
- Moderator: Ok...there....that's before you even read it..
- 1A: That's hard...The hardest question in the last passage with...with no more time for you to think about it..
- 3A: (unclear)
- 1A: Yeah.. it's.... yeah...you will freak out. (laughter)
- Moderator: So...umm... are you saying that the...that type of question is more difficult than the other questions?
- (in unison): Yup...yes...sure
- Moderator: Really? You find this matching of headlines ... more difficult?
- 5A: Yeah.. because it take lots...
- 1A: Not more difficult but it takes time to understand every paragraph and to put the right heading for it..
- Moderator: Alright, so it's more time-consuming.
- 1A/3A: Yeah, yeah
- Moderator: Ok.. then you have 31 to 35 which are Yes/No/Not-Given questions.. we have talked about Yes/No/Not-Given
- 5A: But I think in this part...that ..uh... the questions is more different than the paragraph...
- 1A: Yeah, they were
- 5A: Yeah..
- Moderator: What do you mean?
- 5A: In an indirect way...and you cannot understand the questions and the paragraph itself...
- Moderator: Ok...so you are saying it's not literal, it's not direct, it's more indirect...
- 1A: Yeah...
- Moderator: How do you feel? You are smiling..so maybe (laughter) Maybe...
- 3A: I didn't ...I didn't even have the time to...
- Moderator: Right...
- 3A: Because...
- Moderator: So you haven't even... do you have any feelings about the Yes/No? Do you like those? (laughter)
- 3A: It way it looks like... Oh my God.. (laughter)
- 5A: In the first passage it was very easy than the third one..
- Moderator: Ok..so.. you think it depends on this...whether this is hard or not depends on the passage?
- 1A/5A: Yeah...yeah
- Moderator: Not the question?
- 1A/3A: Yeah...

- Moderator: More the passage?
- 1A: Passage...
- Moderator: Yes/No/Not-given.... Do you have any challenges with finding the yeses and the nos and the not-givens... are you... of those 3 is any one of those difficult for you?
- 1A: No..
- Moderator: Or are they all relatively the same?
- 1A: I guess, we ..we understand maybe the difference between the yes and the no and the not-given...
- Moderator: Right..
- 1A: Cause..they were talking about the food, for example, and they said something about the food, but I haven't read it before..
- Moderator: Right..
- 1A: And it will be not-given.
- Moderator: Ok.
- 1A: That's what I think about... I don't have a problem...with this...
- Moderator: You don't have a problem with..the three different kinds?
- 5A: I think no and not given.. no and not-given... it..they are more similar because I can't distinguish between
- Moderator: Between the no and not-given? It's hard to distinguish?
- 5A: Yes, I guess that..
- 3A: Sometimes on the exam they confuse us..and they bring something.... It's ...it's something related to something in the passage and sometimes you get confused whether it's no or not giving and sometimes and ..you say not giving and it's actually no because of some .. of a small word that is the key word..
- Moderator: Yes... ok... let's look at the last questions 36 to 39. These are matching questions..again... And you need to ..um...match the beginning of the sentence to the ending.
- 1A: Hmm... this is the most difficult one, I think (laughter)
- Moderator: I know you didn't do this but have a look at the question to see what you think.. you know... how you feel about this..this type of question.
- 5A: I guess it's similar..uh... for the heading...
- 1A: Yeah..the heading..yeah..
- 5A: To match the heading with the..the paragraphs..
- 1A: Yeah.. they are the same but maybe they are harder... a little bit
- Moderator: Why do you say they are similar? I mean... you are matching... but what else is similar about the...
- 1A: You have lots of options..
- Moderator: Right..
- 1A: And few...uh...few....
- Moderator: Questions?
- 1A: Questions to answer them.
- 3A: I think these questions need more concentration ...

- 1A: Yeah..
- 3A: ...and more understanding of the paragraph so when I read, I must concentrate more and be able to understand more. If I wasn't able to do that with the paragraph, I will have difficulty in these kind of questions and I might not get the correct answers.
- 1A: So.. it depends on.. how do you read the passage and how do you get the.. the information from it.. and if you got the passage correctly, you will answer easily... maybe..
- Moderator: Ok..
- 1A: But with... with this small amount of time, you will freak out and you won't be able to answer it.
- Moderator: You freak out because..
- 1A: There is no time
- Moderator: There is no time..
- 1A: And I want to collect marks..
- Moderator: Right...
- 1A: That's why I was trying to answer all the questions... even though I don't know if they are right or wrong.. for example..here, I did it A B C...
- Moderator: So... 36-39 you would just go ABCDEFG... (singing) (laughter)
- 1A: Yeah...
- Moderator: You'd guess.
- 1A: Yeah..
- Moderator: Just to see.. Ok. That's not a bad strategy. Look at question 40, that..that question is slightly different. It's asking you about phrases that best describe the main purpose or the aim of the whole passage.. How do you feel about that question? It's a little bit different than the other ones.
- 3A: It's like the..the other questions..you need concentration and understanding...
- 1A: Yeah..
- 3A: Because if I was able to concentrate and understand - grasp the most Amount information I can, uh... it would be ... it would help me to answer these questions much faster and save more time to re..revise things.
- 1A: That's why it's better to have an interesting topic so when you read about the topic, the information are still in your head...cause you was..(unclear) while you are reading ..reading...so when you come here, no no this is not the best one... you don't need to read the passage..
- Moderator: Right...
- 1A: ..all the ..whole passage again... you ..just... know it.
- Moderator: Ok.. Let's talk about that for one more minute.. the idea of interest. If you are interested in the reading, you find it – if I am not mistaken – you find it easier to handle the passage when it's interesting?
- 1A/3A: Yeah...yes...

- Moderator: What determines whether it is interesting or not? Is it your...personality? Is it your culture? Is it what you have studied in school? Is it because you are female? Can you think about that for a minute and what makes something, do you think, interesting?
- 1A: I guess all of what you have just said... because.. it's just..something that is ..weird that is different. That I know... I know... I have a background about it but there is a specific thing I don't know...for example, I read an article on National Geographic, it was.. it was about a cat that has genetic .. um... half side of..of her body was another genes and the other side was... other genes.
- Moderator: Wow... (chuckle)
- 1A: Yeah... it is scientific article with lots of genes and x and y's... and etc. But having a cat with two different genes, it was uhh ...very interesting for me to read it.
- Moderator: Right..
- 1A: Although it was a hard one, and I had some difficulty to understand it, but I was trying to understand it because it was very, very interesting.
- Moderator: And you have some background with the concepts of genetics and the concept of cats?
- 1A: Yeah... that's right.
- Moderator: So..ok..so you..
- 1A: Yeah..
- Moderator: Alright... how about you guys? What do you think determines whether something is interesting?
- 3A: Uhh.. all these factors that you mentioned before... but in the exam, you can't determine... you can't just tell them I want something.. I want an article...
- Moderator: No.. of course not, no... you have to read what they give you.. (laughter)
- 3A: But...
- Moderator: But for you... what do you think is the main determiner?
- 3A: In an exam, I think .... The examiners are the one who should ..uh... choose the topics and they must put in articles with an interesting photo or an interesting title at least to get the interest of the examiner (*meant examinee, I think*). This... like she said... it really helps a lot when we are reading and anything or even reading for ...
- 1A: Yeah... it could .. it could be hard but interesting at the same time. Even though if it was hard and interesting, I will learn from it.
- Moderator: Right...
- 1A: Even if it was an exam... when I ... when I ..uhh... exit from the exam, I will have lots information in my head, because I have read the article and I benefit from it. Not I just read it to answer the question.
- Moderator: Right...

- 3A: So, it's not just some exam... it's something I enjoyed reading and just answered some questions about ... even though I didn't do well, but at least I get something new and...
- 1A: I know..
- 3A: Enjoyed...
- Moderator: Further to your comment about the ...the exam.. the examiners... the people writing the exam , you said should make it interesting, yes?
- 1A/3A: Yeah.. yup
- Moderator: Now... what advice would you give the examiners if they were sitting here with regards to the reading?
- 1A: Yup. I guess I would say... find a general known topic but choose a specific weird, interesting thing about it and put it in the exam.. even if it was hard, even it has lots of vocabulary, academic words, .. but if it's interesting and weird, I guess it will take our attention... attention more than boring...
- 3A: So, it just would not be an exam.. it will make us feel like we are challenging ourselves when we are reading this..ah... why we need... we are learning something new because we like the topic so we are challenging ourselves to understand this even though we don't know these vocabs.. but it's just like a challenge with yourself...and to see how much you can understand and how much you can do about it...
- 1A: Yeah... I guess that's why if it's from National Geographic website.. they may bring articles from there because they are very interesting articles.
- Moderator: Now one last question, before I let you go, I know you want to go ...one last question... You are saying it would be interesting for you..
- 1A: Yeah.
- Moderator: Now... would you think what's interesting for you would also be interesting for everybody ..it's an international test?
- 1A: Yeah..
- Moderator: Do you think that this... what's interesting for you would also fit other people?
- 1A: Well, actually, there is 3 reading passages. So, they can make one of them more like... girlie.. (laughter)... for the boys.. and the other one for the adults... but (laughter)
- 3A: I don't think there is a need to do something for the girls and for the boys, it's just something... there are many criteria for peoples and their personalities.. if they could get at least 3 criteria in each exam , three interesting articles, for this criteria..the examiners (*means examinees*) will enjoy it more.
- 1A: Yeah... a part about animals, culture, and buildings, for example... but interesting ones...
- Moderator: Thank you very much.

**Group B Transcription**

- M: This is book 3, test 2-Focus group B... thank you and welcome. Today , I am going to ask you about the three readings you have done. They are exam readings from the past... they are real readings and I would like to talk about the topics and the questions. Alright? So, first of all... can you tell me about the readings? (silence)  
How do you feel? (silence)  
There are three. There is the remarkable beetle, then there is no title for that one but it has to do with.... environment, yes? And farming. And the last one is the concept of role theory. So you can comment on any of them... as you like. (silence)  
(participants giggle)  
Ok... we'll start with (laughter)... ah...ok... we will start with passage 1 – a remarkable beetle. Yes? Tell me about this reading.
- 2B: I think this reading... it was very easy for me because I have a lot of knowledge about this stuff.. something about environment and something also about the government. So, I think the reading is basics for the knowledge. If you have a knowledge, you will (unclear) fast. It is not only for ..ahh... you can read, you must have a knowledge, a background about the topics that you have.
- M: So, the topic here is a remarkable beetle. Do you have background about this beetle?
- 2B: A little bit. So I can understand it.. talk about this passage.
- M: Ok.
- 3B: I think the answer is..eh... obvious in the passage and I can choose easily.
- M: Ok. Let's look at the questions. We have 3 sets of different questions. Questions 1 to 5 are yes, no, not-given and they're literal – they're supposed to be easy to find.... They're direct answers. How do you feel about that? Questions 1 to 5.
- 7B: They weren't hard to locate..
- M: They were not?
- 7B: No. The answers were easy, I guess.
- M: Ok. Everyone agree with that...that it was relatively easy or no?
- 2B: Yes. It's very easy.
- M: How do you find yes, no, not-given questions in general? Do you find them tricky or do you find them easy or ..
- 7B: Easy...
- M: Easy.
- 2B: For this passage...
- M: For this passage, it's easy?
- (mix of ladies) Yes. Yes.
- M: But generally speaking... do you find them easy?
- 4B: Yes...easy... sometimes
- M: You do?

- 4B: Sometimes
- M: Sometimes? Ok. Let's look at questions 6 to 8. This is a diagram (unclear)... it is a question called RAL which means you have to rethink everything and then label. How did you feel about that?
- 2B: It's the easiest question...
- M: Really?
- (unclear): Yes
- M: Why? Why do you think this is easy?
- 3B: The (unclear) number... and I can find the number...
- 7B: Yeah... exactly...
- 3B: Easy...
- M: You can find the number in the passage, but you're not doing numbers here... questions 6 to 8
- 7B: (unclear... too much static)
- M: So question 6, 7, 8 because of the picture?
- 3B: Yes
- M: ... with the numbers you find it easy?
- 3B: Yes
- 4B: Yes
- 7B: Yes
- M: Really? Ok. Alright... the last one ... the last question is a chart that you must complete... and that's what you call a literal fill in the blank. How do you feel about this one?
- 7B: It's a little harder but it's easy in this topic.
- M: You find the topic easy?
- 7B: Yeah
- M: The beetle topic you find easy or the general topic of environment?
- 7B: No, the general topic of environment.
- M: OK.
- 4B: They give the example...like in front... and after that... when I see chart and the example inside and all this , I can answer all questions from 9 to number 13.
- M: I see. So the example helps you?
- 4B: Yeah
- M: Yeah?
- 2B: And the easiest things here that there is no hard vocabulary to understand, so it's very easy to figure out the answers.
- M: How about you? What do you think?
- 3B: I think it was so easy ..
- M: Yup..
- 3B: Because..uh..I (unclear)... an example. So we can find the question in the number graph... the answers.
- M: Ok. Let's go back looking for the topic again – a remarkable beetle. What's the passage about?

- You say generally it's about environment or is it about the beetle?
- 7B: It's how to use the beetle in an environmentally good way or how to ..
- M: In an environmentally good way..
- 7B: Or how to put the (unclear) by using the beetle
- M: What kind of beetle is this?
- 7B: That's the dung beetle.
- M: The dung beetle. Do you have those here?
- 7B: Hmm... I doubt it.
- M: Do you have them here in the UAE... dung beetles?
- 4B: Yup.
- M: Yeah.
- 4B: (mumbling)
- M: (laughter) You don't know? Maybe not... I don't know (laughter).  
Ok. Alright but...even though you are not related...you do not know much about the beetle...
- 4B: Yeah
- M: ...the main topic of the environment was ok?
- 4B: Yes.
- M: Yes? So, let's move on to the second reading.. passage two.. there is no title here. How do you feel about that?
- 2B: It's more easier if there is a title or a diagram to explain what's happening in this passage or what's talking about, so we must here to scan/skim quickly so maybe it's make some student nervous.
- M: Right. Because there is no title... you ..uh..all feel this way? You feel the title helps you?
- 4B: Yes. Of course.
- M: So when there is no title... what kind... what happens?.... what do you think?
- 2B: You must – like for me- read the subtit...ah... the topic sentence of each paragraph to understand what happened so it will take a long time than if I have a title.
- M: ...it takes time... how do you feel sir?
- 7B: As they feel...
- M: Same, sir? You too (to another student)?
- 4B: Yeah. I take much time to read this passage more than the other passage.
- M: Really? Why?
- 4B: Because there is no time
- M: Because there is no time. Ok. Alright...now they want you to do questions 14 to 18 – match the headings...yes?.. to the paragraphs. So they have a list of headings. These types of questions are rethinking questions but matching, yes? Where you have to match... how do you feel about this type of question?
- 2B: I am afraid about this question
- M: You are afraid of this question? (laughter)

- 3B: Yes.
- M: Why?
- 2B: Because sometimes you find that there are two ideas in the same paragraph but one of this idea is the general idea and the correct idea. So, it's difficult to figure which one.
- M: Which one is the correct one?
- 2B: Yes.
- M: So, there is more than one answer, in your opinion? There is more than one answer for the headings.
- 2B: Yes.
- M: But there is really one answer.
- (chuckles)
- M: Oh. Ok. How do you feel about this one?
- 7B: That's why I hate it.
- M: You hate this one? (laughter) For the same reason?
- 7B: Yeah.
- M: What about you?
- 3B: I don't like this question but I feel that this.. the first...uh.. this passage it was not so easy.
- M: Not so easy, yeah? Alright. What about the topic of this one? We've talked about no title... what was the topic of this one? Can you tell me?
- 7B: The effect of humans on farming and the environment – like how do they use fertilizers and pesticides and how it affects the environment.
- M: Right... we are talking about the environment again?
- 7B: uhummm.
- M: How do you feel about having the same topic again?
- 2B: It's more easier if you have a background in environment. But sometimes you have like a questions or passage about something in philosophy so you cannot understand... (unclear) the vocabulary to understand. So, something in the environment... it's ..it's around us so we can understand something. You have a brief idea. But some..sometimes you have scientific thing we cannot understand it easily.
- M: Ok. How do you feel about the same topic again (to another student)?
- 7B: Having the same topic twice maybe confuses us because sometimes we have again the same vocab and maybe you refer to the old ...uh... of the other title... in the answer.
- M: Right... you are thinking about the first passage?
- 7B: Yes.
- M: When you answer the second.
- (laughter)
- 7B: Sometimes.
- M: That's an interesting point. How do you feel about that
- 4B: hmmm... I think.. uh... I take many time this ...uh... section in this passage.. so maybe all my answer will be wrong. (laughter)

- M: Is it because of the topic or what – why do you- did you take so long?  
 4B: Because first no title..  
 M: No title...  
 4B: And I should read all the section and understand each one and then I should ..uh..paraphrase...or... put a ..a .. a sentence about this section and what it about and also (unclear), I should ..uh... I use some highlight to ..uh... (unclear)...the country.. or.. like to make the (unclear) more easier too.
- M: Ok. You?  
 3B: It's not from the field.... that we have three passage about the environment because each passage have..uh..a question that we can answer.
- M: So, you're ok with..  
 3B: Yes.  
 M: Having it another time. Well, let's look at the question format. Questions 19 to 22 is the first one.. and it's literal fill in the blanks. How did you find this one?
- (silence)
- M: You have to fill in the blanks... but then you have to match (unclear)... a little more difficult than fill in the blank.
- 2B: Yes  
 M: What do you think of this?  
 7B: Again, easy.  
 M: You thought it was easy?  
 7B: ahem  
 M: Why? What..what made it easy?  
 7B: Maybe the examples are the... like the things that you choo... ah... choose
- M: Ok. Because they have a chart there already?  
 7B: Yeah  
 M: ... with some examples?  
 7B: It's easier to get the...the answer from the...topic.  
 4B: I don't think so.  
 M: You don't think so?  
 4B: No.. because we have a choice here so it was difficult for me.  
 M: So... the fact that ... you had.... How many choices did you have?  
 2B: 7! And its make difficult...  
 M: 7?  
 2B: Yeah. Because we must choose 4 and we have 3 so it's a chance to get something wrong. Not correct.
- M: Alright. Let's look at the next questions 23 to 27. They're a mix of ...umm... rethinking questions and literal but they're all multiple choice. Ok? What do you think?  
 4B: Easy.

- M: You like that? Easy?  
4B: It's because...uh... we... (unclear)  
M: You have what?  
2B: There is a number... like key words...  
4B: Yeah  
2B: ...the key words is obvious here... you can see them  
M: Ok. So they've got key words...so it's easier to find the answer?  
4B: Yes.  
M: What do you think? You said it was easy too?  
3B: ..because the... we can see the questions and find the same words in the... the passage.  
2B: I think it's the easier because we can figure the numbers easily than figure some words so if you see the numbers, you can go to the passage.. this paragraph.. so you can find the..the answer quickly, not to read all the passage to find the other information.  
3B: But from 26 to 27 there is no numbers.  
M: There are no numbers from 26 to 27. Yeah... that's true. So what did you do there to help find the answer?  
2B: Find the key word again.  
M: Just find the key word?  
3B: All key words here... it will be in the passage. (unclear) Ok. From 23 to 25 it's easy but from 26 to 27 I think..harder.  
M: A little harder? Because there is no number? Alright. So, let's go on to the next one. Reading passage 3 - the concept of role theory – what did you think of that title when you first read it?  
3B: (unclear)  
M: Sorry?  
4B: Maybe about the .... (silence)  
M: What did you think it was about? The concept of role theory.  
4B: I thought it was about business.  
M: Business?  
3B: A person  
M: Person?  
3B: And the mind  
M: And the mind? Hmmm. (to another student) Did you have any idea what it was about when you read that title?  
2B: I thought there'd be something about the type of thinking, or something because there is a diagram and have many arrows..  
M: Oh? Down ... underneath it? Yeah.  
2B: Yes, so I think maybe...  
M: Alright...is this something that you... this topic... is there something that ...uh... you are very familiar with?  
2B: hmmm  
M: Or is this a new idea?

- 3B: New idea  
 2B: Yeah, new idea.  
 M: It's new? Ok. Ummm... how did you feel about that? That you have no background in this? How did that make you feel?  
 3B: ummm  
 2B: It's difficult for us because it's the 3<sup>rd</sup> passage and there is no time if you are (unclear)
- (laughter)
- M: There is no time... (chuckle) You feel the same way (to another student)?  
 7B: Yeah. I couldn't read at all.  
 M: You couldn't read it?  
 7B: No  
 M: Because of the time or the topic?  
 7B: Because of the time...  
 2B: And sometimes when you are afraid, you give up. There is no time and you are nervous, you can't read ..  
 M: Right...  
 2B: ...or answer the questions.  
 M: And...when you have a new idea ... how does this make you feel when it's the 3<sup>rd</sup> passage?  
 3B: You must read it...uh... more than one time.  
 M: You must read it more than one time?  
 2B: There is no time...  
 M: But you have no time? But how are your feelings... you are reading it going 'I don't know anything about this topic'  
 2B: Sometimes...  
 M: How do you feel when ..when that happens?  
 2B: Sometimes , in real IELTS, if the passage – the topic of the passage is interested for me – maybe I will just read it without answering anything only...uh... like 2 minutes..like guessing the answers..uh ... that's it. But because, maybe I want to know more about this information, I would take a long time to read than answers.  
 M: Ok  
 2B: So I think, it's a (unclear) technique but there is no ... no time. So, I must be more relaxed and comfortable because I will have writing after that.  
 M: Yes.  
 2B: So, I don't want to (unclear)  
 M: Ok. Now. You don't know anything about the concept of role theory. Why is that? Can you talk about why you don't know anything about it?  
 4B: Why would we  
 M: (laughter) Yeah. Why would you know anything about this?  
 2B: Maybe because we don't read something about this.  
 M: You have never read it before?  
 2B: Yeah. Each person interested about something so you cannot say for

- others go and read about this topic or this article, it's a general...
- M: So, you are not interested in this kind of thing?
- (various): hmmm
- M: Right? Is that what you are saying? Yes or no?
- 4B: No.
- M: No? (laughter). Ok..so... interest is one thing, yes? What about in school? Did you study any psychology or anything related to this?
- 3B: No.
- M: No? So you haven't seen this before in school?
- 3B: No.
- M: Ok. Alright. Ummm.... Let's go back to interest. How important do you think interest is ... in answering the questions and reading the passages?
- 2B: It's the first key to answering the questions.
- M: You think it's important – it's the first key
- 2B: Yeah. to answer the questions.
- M: Why?
- 2B: Because when you are interested about something, you can read more and more about these things .. it will be easy to have.. to have a background . And sometimes, maybe you didn't read all the passage because you have this information before. Only to check it's correct or not and (unclear)
- M: So you think interest is important. What do you think? Is it important when you got...
- (to another student)
- 7B: Yeah. I think when you are interested in something, you can concentrate more on the subject.
- (unclear due to static)
- M: What do you think? (to another student)
- 3B: I think you must be interest in reading but it's not in the IELTS exam. ..because it's only the exam. You can..uh... scan and skim and answer the questions.
- M: So... you don't think it matters for an IELTS exam – whether it's interesting or not?
- 3B: Yes.
- 4B: Maybe if I interested in the passage and the ...uh...uh.... the title, I can..uh... answer all questions easily and uh...find the answer quickly. So... must be...
- M: So, you think it matters. Is there anything else you want to say about the reading part of the IELTS exam? Either on this or in general.
- 2B: I think this is really easy for us because the real IELTS exam become more difficult and this...
- M: This is a real IELTS.
- 2B: Yeah. But not in recent years. It's like..it's...
- M: It's... what book it it? Book 3... yeah.. it's a little old.
- 2B: Yeah. So.. the kind of the questions is difficult now because maybe you

have like..in true and false answer maybe 1 word false and the rest of the sentence is true so...

M: So, they've changed the exam over the years?

2B: Not ... not change... make it more difficult.

M: More difficult than before?

2B: Yes...yeah.... Because it's not the first language for us so it's difficult for us. And the other thing is that...the time. There is really a short time for us.... Because you are grow with English,- growing with English- it's easy for you. But for us..

M: Yes, for second language learners ...everyone says that..yes. I agree. Ok. Anything else you want to say about the reading. No? Last chance...

(laughter). Thank you so much. I really appreciate your help.

**Group C Transcription**

- M: Book 7, test 3. This is group C. Thank you all for coming.
- 2C: You're welcome.
- M: Now this was a real test that was part of an IELTS test a few years ago, alright? And this is the reading part only. So... I am going to ask you some questions about the readings and the topics and the questions. Ok? Let's start with reading passage 1 – Ant Intelligence. Tell me... what do you think about this reading? Any... you can talk across each other, it doesn't matter. Yeah? Have a discussion. Anyone who wants to answer...
- 1C: I think the first reading is an easy..uh..easy reading but it has more academic words so it's more time. You have to consid... you have to deeply concentrate..
- M: Ahem...
- 1C: So it's need time to be solved.
- M: Ok. Even the first passage?
- 1C: Yeah. Yeah
- M: Even though it's easier. Do you agree with that?
- Mix: Yeah, of course
- 3C: And I think we need more time to do
- M: More time to do it?
- 3C: Yes
- M: Everyone says that. What about your topic – ant intelligence? How do you feel about this topic?
- 2C: I think that..like this article...like...talk about like..uh... the benefits between the ant intelligence and the humans because they just...like... compare how do...like...the human think and it is flexible like the ant..like for the ant.
- M: Right... so it's comparing the ant thinking to the human thinking. Yes? And how do you feel about that?
- 3C: I am interesting in this.
- M: You are?
- 3C: Yes.
- M: You're interested in this?
- 3C: Yes.
- M: Anyone else?
- 1C: Me too.
- 5C: The topic is ...is captivating but it doesn't really...uh... I mean...express what's in the passage.
- M: Ok. So, what? ...the title doesn't really talk about.... are you saying the title doesn't talk about...
- 5C: From my perspective, it doesn't.
- M: Ok. Alright...um... let's look at the questions, I guess. You don't find anything strange about the topic though? You think it's an ok topic?
- (Mix): Yeah...yeah...

- M: Yes? Ok. So let's move on to the first questions – questions 1 to 6. Those are literal true and false questions. Ok... that's what I have labeled them as. How did you feel about these questions?
- 5C: (unclear) was tricky.
- 4C: Yeah.
- M: Some of these were tricky?
- Mix: Yeah (mumbling from various people)
- 1C: I think that...uh... questions 1...uh... to 3 was easy but 3...but 4 to 5 was trick.
- 5C: Yes.
- M: Ok. So...the ..the ones further down were trickier?
- 1C: Yeah.
- M: So you feel the questions got more difficult?
- 1C: Yeah.
- 3C: Yes.
- M: Ok.. what did you do to get this ..uh... the answers for these?
- 1C: I do find the synonyms for the question..
- M: Ok..
- 1C: And I try to find...like..uh.. key words... I underline it and then I like... to skim the passage...
- M: You skimmed the passage? For the key words?
- (mix): Yeah, yup.
- 1C: All of...
- 3C: Synonyms
- M: Synoymy?
- 1C: Might be words in the question or the synonym... synonyms.
- M: Ok. Overall, did you have trouble with either one or either of the three – true, false, not-given- or are they relatively difficult on the same level?
- 1C: No.... I usually have trouble with not-given.
- M: Not-given?
- Mix: Yes. Yeah.
- M: You all do?
- 3C: Yes.
- M: Well, tell me why- why you think that.
- 1C: Because, we don't know if we have to put it false or not-given, sometimes it is given but in synonym so we skip.... skip the part of the sentence ...now we don't know where is the sentence.
- M: Ok.
- 1C: So..
- M: So, sometimes it is in a synonym form
- 1C: Yeah...yeah..
- M: ...and you don't recognize it.
- Mix: Yeah, yes.
- 3C: It's tricky sometimes.

- M: Anyone else? (silence) ... You don't like the not-given, huh?
- 3C: Yes.
- M: Ok. Let's go to the next questions 7 to 13. This is a summary question which is actually labeled RAFB, which means it's... you have to rethink it and fill in the blanks. It's a rethinking process and filling in the blanks. Ok? Ummm.... What do you think?
- 1C: I think...eh... it's have a numbers like dates... it would be...it would be easier than this cause...
- M: If it has numbers...sorry? Again...
- 1C: Uh.. like years.. 1990...
- M: Oh, years. Ok. Ahum...
- 1C: It would be easy to find it in the reading.
- M: Ok. And here they have words so you think it's..
- 1C: Yeah
- 2C: Because some of the words..like...seem like... so similar to each other because we can't ...like...just choose...any one.
- M: So you mean the choices...the answers...seem similar?
- 2C: Yeah
- 3C: Yes
- 5C: And Miss...it's written...write the correct letter..
- M: Yes...
- 5C: Uhh.... like...uhhh... we didn't...some of them just wrote the over..
- M: You wrote the word not the letter?
- 4C: Me.. I did.
- M: You did, yeah? So, the instructions are a little confusing?
- 5C: Yeah.
- M: ..the way they formatted it..ok. That's tricky, isn't it?
- 1C: The available words... more than the spaces.
- M: Yes, there are definitely more spaces... and how do you find that? Oops... not more spaces, sorry... more choices
- Mix: Yeah... more choices
- M: ..does that make it easier or difficult or..
- 1C: Difficult to answer the question.
- 2C: I think that sometimes...like...you need to know what's...which is ...like.. the preposition or is it noun or verb so..
- M: Oh... the part of speech?
- 2C: Yeah. So, need know...like...what's...like...the noun or verb to use it.
- M: Ok... anything else you want to say about the first passage- ant intelligence?
- 5C: Nothing.
- M: Did you find the topic offensive in any way? That your intelligence is being compared to an ant.
- 5C: No
- M: You don't find it offensive?

- 5C: No
- 2C: I think that.
- M: You think it's offensive?
- 2C: Yes.
- M: (To another student) Do you think it's offensive?
- 3C: Yes.
- M: Why? Because you are being compared to an ant? (laughter)  
Ok... then tell my why (to 5C) you are not offended?
- 5C: It's just...kind of a study... we learn from everything... God made us...
- M: So... we learn from everything?
- 5C: Yeah. We all learn from everything.
- M: So you don't take offence...
- 5C: No
- M: ...if you're a little like an ant. Ok. (laughter)... Reading passage 2, let's have a look. Is there a title? ..... Yes. The title is 'Population Movements and Genetics', right?
- Mix: Yes.
- M: Let's just start with the title itself. Did you find this easy, difficult, umm could you guess what it's about? Tell me your feelings.
- 1C: From the title we can guess...uh...it's about movement of people to ... from country to other country ..so from continents to others.
- M: Did you understand the role of genetics when you read the title? Are movements and genetics connected...did you understand that?
- Mix: No...no...no
- M: But once you have read it, you understand what they mean?
- Mix: Yes...yeah..
- M: Ok...umm... anything offensive about this title or topic? (laughter) Did you like this topic?
- 3C: Not really.
- 5C: Not really.
- M: Not really? No? Why not?
- 3C: It's speak a lot about people and distance, travelling...
- M: Ok..
- 3C: and numbers... there are..
- M: And what? Numbers? That's true... it did.
- 2C: So, it's ..like...someone who read ..like...biology book.
- M: Yeah
- 2C: (unclear)
- 4C: But as far as I'm concerned, I find this ..the essay more interesting than the previous one.
- M: Than the first one?
- 4C: Because I love..uh... historic events and I enjoyed...uh... reading it.
- M: Ok... and (5C )... you... you too? You like this topic?
- 5C: The topic itself is like a hook. Once I read the topic, I'm interested to read

- the whole passage.
- M: Ok... so you don't all agree....some of you think this is not so good and some of you like the topic.
- 5C: Yes.
- M: Is it a topic that you know a lot about?
- 5C: No.
- M: No?
- 5C: No.
- 3C: Not really.
- M: Not really, no? And...why ...why do you think that is..that you don't know a lot about that topic?
- 1C: Because...in my secondary school, I didn't...eh... take an history ..history books and I stopped...uhh... studying history since I was in grade 9.
- M: In grade 9? What did you do in high school?
- 1C: In high school...just about English and math and physics.
- M: Ok... so there was no history?
- 1C: Yeah.
- M: Is that the same for all of you?
- 5C: No.
- 3C: Yes.
- M: (3C) yes... 4C?
- 4C: I had history in grade 10 and then I stopped.
- M: You did?
- 5C: Yeah.. just to grade 10.
- M: You too?
- 5C: Just to grade 9.
- M: Grade 9? So it varies .. yes?
- Mix: Yeah
- M: So... you really weren't taught a lot of this. Yes? What about genetics? Do you know a little bit about genetics?
- 2C: Yeah...we took it...like... in grade 10 to 12 maybe.. I think. Because... like.. I know more specific words about genetics. Just like I know some background about it.
- M: Right.
- 2C: Yeah.
- M: Do you agree? You know a little bit about genetics?
- 5C: Yeah.
- M: Yeah? Was it studied in high school like he said..
- 5C: Yeah..in high school
- M: ...through the later years?
- 5C: Yes... the government high school..yeah..
- M: In the government high school?
- Mix: Yes...yeah...
- 4C: All the studying was about genetics and the human body.

- M: And the human body?
- 4C: Yes.
- M: So...was that biology?
- 5C: Biology
- 4C: Biology
- 3C: I don't study..
- M: You didn't study?
- 3C: No
- M: Was it a choice for you?
- Mix: No...no...no
- M: You just didn't study...
- 1C: We just have physics and chemistry.
- M: Oh...ok...so it depended on your high school then?
- Mix: Yeah... yes... yeah...
- M: Alright...well then.. let's look at the list of headings...the exercise itself – questions 14 to 19. You have 10 headings and you have (1..2...3..4...5..6..), you have 6 paragraphs they want you to give a heading too, yes?
- 3C: Yes.
- M: This is... a type of question it's called...uh... rethinking and matching. It's a RAM question...they call it. So you have to rethink and match. How do you feel about that?
- 4C: I found this question more confusing than the other questions because some headings have ..umm... the same words as the other headings. So you have to read..uh... the paragraph more than once..umm... to know the right answer.
- M: Ok. And...what about anybody else? Did you find it more difficult than the true/false?
- 1C: I think the examiners try to trick the...uhhh..uhh... trick the students to confuse them in the.. in the exam...so they try to put...uhhh... difficult words and they say to the students you have to think about the topic.
- M: Ok...but... so you're thinking they are doing this on purpose ..
- 1C: Yeah
- M: Umm... the vocabulary is difficult but you're saying in some... (to 4C).. you were saying the vocabulary is the same in some of them?
- 4C: Yes, some...
- M: And this causes confusion ?
- Mix: Yes... yeah
- M: Why? Why does the same vocabulary cause confusion?
- 4C: As you can see, there is two or three headings have 3-wave theory.
- M: Right.
- 4C: Uh.... Some paragraphs talk about 3 waves ..uh... paragraph D talks about the... explain the 3 waves and the others talks about the results and stuff...
- M: Ok

- 4C: ...so you have to read more than once to know which one..
- M: ...matches...
- 4C: Yes
- M: Ok. Umm... Anyone else have any comments about matching the headlines or sorry...headings to the paragraphs?
- 1C: I think it's the hardest question on the IELTS...
- M: On the IELTS?
- 1C: Yeah
- 2C: And ...like..if you want..like.. solve it, you need...like..uh... various types of technologic..uh... various types of ...like solvents.... like first of all..
- M: Like techniques, you mean?
- Mix: Yeah..yes..yeah
- M: To solve this? Not just one technique...many?
- Mix: No..no..
- 2C: Many techniques.
- 1C: Heading gives headache.
- M: Headings give you a headache? (laughter) Ok...well...questions 20 to 21... let's see if you like those better. It's still the same passage..but this is a literal, fill in the blank chart... activity. How do you feel about that? With...there is a diagram with arrows..how do you feel about all that?
- 1C: In my opinion it's ..uhh... it's easy because it's ..uh... explained in the reading..
- M: Yes...
- 1C: ..we have to look at the ...uh.. graph and understand it. Yeah.
- M: So, you look at the graph and understand it... and then what?
- 1C: We follow the steps which is that in the reading. Yeah.
- M: So you thought that was relatively easy to answer?
- 1C: Yeah, yes... because there are numbers in the...in the reading...
- M: Ahum...
- 1C: ... we will see the answer of the question.
- M: Ok. Alright...then we'll leave that. Question 22- questions, sorry, 22 to 25.. those are literal and...umm... they're called LAC questions... so let's take a look at what.... You have to choose them, yes? You have to classify.
- 4C: Yeah.
- M: So, they give you the name of the group and then you have to classify the wave number – whether it's A, B, or C. How did you find that?
- Mix: Ah...confusing....confusing...yup...
- M: Really?
- 4C: Yes... because it's not direct, you have to figure out ..like uh... these names , I find...uh I found them in many paragraphs, not just one.
- M: Ok.
- 4C: You have to read..uh.. paragraph...uh... I think , G...D...D.... 3 paragraphs.

- M: So you had to read more than one paragraph...
- 4C: Yes
- 5C: Yeah
- M: Why? Because they had these names – Inuit, Apache- they have it in more than one paragraph?
- 3C: Yes
- 5C: Yes
- M: So your technique is you scan .. for the name of the group....is that your technique?
- 4C: Also, it doesn't say ..uh.... like Apache.... doesn't say it's from the..uh... second wave. You just have to figure out yourself.
- M: Yes. .. which is the first, second, and the third... so they didn't use the terms first, second, and third in the reading?
- Mix: No..no..no
- M: And the last question, question 26, is a rethinking question and a multiple choice question. Let's have a quick look at that. It's about...uh... the research involved ..yeah?
- 4C: Yeah
- 5C: Yeah
- M: ... and it involved the examination of what? Did you find that easy?
- 4C: Noooo
- M: Do you remember?
- 2C: Just like the... the main idea... what you think about this...uh...
- 1C: ...understanding the (unclear)
- 2C: (unclear)
- M: Yeah? So you think it's more like a main idea thing... question
- Mix: Yeah...
- M: Ok. Last passage... there is no title. How do you feel about that? You have a picture....
- 1C: Yeah... we have a picture
- M: ...yeah... which is nice... but how do you feel about not having a title?
- 2C: We don't like to read that paragraph ... so we have ...like...some paragraph about it.
- M: The first paragraph... you read... because there is no title?
- 2C: No title...
- M: What did you do (to 1C)?
- 1C: I read the first sentence, I read the questions ... so I related to forests and... like this.
- M: Ok... so you figured out quickly it's about forests..
- Mix: Yeah... yes
- M: Yes? So... did that bother you that there wasn't a title or was that ok?
- Mix: Ok.
- M: It was ok with you?
- 5C: Yeah... the picture speaks for itself.

- M: Ok. So you think the picture helped..ok. Alright. What about the topic – forests? The whole thing is about forests and then the environment, right?
- Mix: Yes...yes
- M: How... how do you feel about that topic of the environment and forests...you don't have a lot of forests here in your country, right?
- 5C: Not one...
- M: (laughter)... so how do you feel about that as a topic?
- 2C: Some of them... like uh... a small forest... like we visit some countries.. like in Europe or in Australia...so... like we know...like... some... or visit some forest over there and we see how...like... a forest.... which like (unclear) over there... like some trees..which kind of trees.
- M: So if you've travelled and seen a forest, do you think the passage is easier to understand?
- 2C: Yes..yeah..like ... I guess you have some ...uhh.. background about it.
- M: You have a little more background about it...yeah? Have all of you travelled?
- 3C: No
- 1C: But I... usually you see from National Geographic..
- M: Ok...
- 1C: Yeah
- M: So you have other ways... if you don't travel you have magazines and movies and...
- 2C: Documentaries
- 4C: Newspapers also
- M: Newspapers... ok. Alright...umm.... The topic of the environment... is that something you studied in school?
- Mix: Yeah... we studied about that..yes
- M: Yes? You studied about the environment?
- 4C: But briefly, not...uh...
- M: Briefly, it's not in detail?
- 3C: Not detail...
- M: Alright... let's have a look at the questions then.... Again we have true, false, not-given. These are on a more difficult passage... you know that passage 1, 2, 3 ..
- Mix: Yeah... yes
- M: ... are harder, yes? Passage 3 is supposed to be the most difficult and you have true/false/not-given. Again... (chuckle).... So, ..uh... have you changed your mind about those? I mean you had them at the beginning and now you have them again. First of all, A) how do you feel about having them twice on the exam and second of all, are they easier or more difficult or do you have any opinion about them attached to the third passage?
- 3C: It's more difficult than the first one.
- M: So you find this true and false more difficult?

- 3C: Yes.
- 4C: Yeah.
- M: Yes? You too?
- 4C: Yeah.
- M: Yes?
- 1C: It's too difficult.
- M: Why?
- 4C: There is...uh... more questions ..like it's uhh... 7 questions, I think. The previous passages are just 4 or 3... 4
- M: Ok. So they were less.
- 4C: Yeah. So, you have to look at each question and scan .. skim for the key words and takes..uh... longer time.
- M: Takes longer? So there are more here... is the passage in your mind more difficult than the first passage or? It's supposed to be but ..
- Mix: Yeah..yeah
- M: ... your opinion
- Mix: Yeah... yeah... yeah...
- 3C: It's difficult...
- M: It is? What makes it more difficult?
- 1C: I think it's not classified as.. uh.. uh... paragraph A or B
- 2C: Not divided well
- M: It's not divided well? Do you find the vocabulary more difficult as well?
- Mix: Yes...yeah ... there are some...
- M: Alright... ok... so that's true or false...
- 5C: Words get more technical in every passage...
- M: In every passage? They become more technical? And then you have...uh... questions 34 to 40. These questions -34 to 39- are ...actually they are all RAM, meaning rethinking and matching.
- 4C: Ahem...
- M: Ok... actually the last one is a multiple choice, isn't it.... not matching. Umm.. you have a little bit like the headings ..
- 3C: Yes
- M: But... it's a matching exercise... you are not given the headings... you have to match it to the resolutions listen in the actual reading. Easy? Hard?
- 3C: Hard.
- M: Hard?
- 4C: This one was easy.
- M: You thought it was easy?
- 4C: Yeah...
- 5C: ...medium..
- M: Medium? (laughter) Giving all sorts of answers. Ok, we'll start with you (3C), why do you think that was hard- matching to the resolutions?
- 3C: Uh... it's tricky...
- M: Tricky?

- 3C: Sometimes some answers is complex.  
M: The...uh... resolution is complex or you mean the actual A,B, C, D, Es are complex?  
3C: Uh... A,B, C, Ds is...  
M: Ok.. so the choices are complex. What do you say to that?  
1C: I think it's easy because we have to look at the graph – resolution 1 and 2 – it's like a step 1 and 2 and 3..we have... uh... when we look at resolution 1, we will find the synonym of the question and we have to look at the answer.  
M: Ok... so you have a technique? You thought it was easy because it focuses only on...  
1C: ...on the resolution...  
M: On the resolution.  
1C: Yeah  
M: (to 2c) What do you think?  
2C: I think that... like... first of all, like read... like... to read about it... like..this resolutions and we need to ..like... have the information about it and then..uh.. we need to figure out the ..what...like the synonyms.  
M: Synonyms again?  
2C: Yeah  
M: Ok. And did you find this... uh..  
2C: Just a little bit hard.  
M: Little bit hard?  
5C: We never really had the chance...  
M: Oh, that's right – we didn't... didn't quite...  
4C: I think too it would be easier if the number of questions equals the number of answers.  
5C: Yeah.  
M: Right. Because they are giving more choices again? That makes it more difficult ..  
3C: Difficult.  
M: If the choices matched the same number as the questions, you think you could figure it out?  
Mix: Yeah...yes  
M: Ok... so that's very interesting. Alright...overall... what do you think about these topics, are they interesting? Are they appropriate for you?  
3C: The first passage was interesting.  
4C: Some of them are ... some of them not... but we have to read it and ..ummm..  
M: Yes. You don't get a choice (laughter). Luck of the draw.  
5C: Exactly.  
M: Ok. Is there anything else you would like to say about the topics or the questions or the exam?  
5C: The exam was hard.

M: Yeah.  
5C: We need to practice more and more.  
M: You need more practice?  
4C: Yes. Because I haven't practised enough.  
M: Ok.  
3C: And we need more time.  
M: You need more time?  
Mix: Yes..yeah...  
1C: Maybe 2 hours... 2 hours each  
M: 2 hours each? (laughter) Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

**Group D Transcription**

- M: This is focus group D who read book 3, test 4. Welcome.  
Now can you tell me about the readings in general? (silence)  
Did you like them? Did you understand them? Anything...
- 4D: The first parts were kind of easy but the third part always hard.
- M: So the first two readings, you are saying, yeah?
- 4D: Yes. The third one is a little bit long and hard.
- M: Ok. Did you finish the third one?
- 4D: Ahh.. no.
- M: No? Ok. Did anyone finish the third one?
- (girls talking over one another): Yeah.... Yeah
- 2D: Yeah.. but we are not sure..
- M: Yeah but you're not sure? Ok... alright. Then let's...let's..let's start with reading one and uhhh... we'll go through it. What was reading one about?
- 4D: Pollution
- 2D: Pollution
- 3D: Yeah.
- M: Pollution? Ok. Now... does reading passage one have a topic? Not a topic, sorry, a headline, like a ... title?
- 1D: Yeah...
- 4D: No.
- 1D: No.
- M: No? It doesn't. So.. how do you feel about that?
- 1D: Umm...
- 4D: Found it confusing...
- M: Was it hard for you at the beginning when there is no title?
- 1D: Yeah...
- M: Or is it alright?
- 3D: No, I think so...
- 5D: No... because the picture describes the ...
- 1D: ...describes the...
- 5D: ...what about the passage
- M: So... the picture helps you? The picture is like a title?
- 1D: Yeah..
- M: But sometimes you have a title and a picture..
- 1D: Yeah..
- M: So how do you feel about a missing title?
- 1D: Uh... a little bit confusing because ...then...we would have to figure out alone... what is the title... and topic sentences.
- M: And topic sentences? Yeah? So... it's a little bit confusing? Yeah?
- ID: Hmm..
- M: What about the topic itself – of pollution? Do you know a lot about this topic?
- ID: Yeah

- 3D: Yes
- M: How come you know so much about this topic?
- 1D: It is not.. it is not the first time to hear it. We hear it a lot.
- M: OK. It is not the first time? Ummm....did you study that then in high school?
- (Mix): Yeah... yeah
- M: Did you study pollution in high school?
- (Mix): Yes...yeah...
- M: Yeah? What class was that?
- 3D: In English classes...
- M: Sorry?
- 3D: We heard about it in English class.
- M: Oh... in English class you heard about it. But you didn't study pollution but the subject has come up before?
- 1D: Yeah
- 3D: Yeah
- M: What do you think about the topic ... uh..of pollution?
- 2D: I think this part was easy...
- M: Ahumm
- 2D: Because this topic is a popular topic..
- M: Ok..
- 2D: And we know about it..
- M: So you know about this topic and you think it's easier because you know about this topic?
- 1D: Yeah... because .. pollution is familiar to us.
- M: Ok.
- 1D: But its was.. its was a new thing..topic... we won't feel this comfortable.
- M: Right...right... so if it's new... then you feel discomfort
- 1D: Yeah...
- M: ...but you're familiar with this.. ok.. Now.. what if we look at the questions quickly and see how you feel about those... the first five questions are labeled literal matching- so what you are supposed to do is match...and... they are supposed to be direct – the answers should be fairly clear – but I am going to ask you what you think about that.
- (silence)
- M: I think, (to 5D), you were a bit confused with the ... the list? (from observations of test taking)
- 5D: Yes.
- M: Tell me what was confusing when you were doing it.
- 5D: Just the organizations...uhh... it's like... uhh.. where to put the numbers and what to write...
- M: OK...so you have numbers and...cities to write.. so you didn't' ...quite understand how to do the activity? Is that what you're saying?
- 5D: Yes.

- M: Did you figure it out at the end?  
 5D: Yes.  
 M: OK... ladies... did you have a challenge with the way this question is set up? Questions 1-5? The matching...  
 1D: No  
 3D: No  
 M: Were you confused?  
 1D: .. it's ok.  
 3D: ..it's ok... because all...we...I find the all answer in one paragraph.  
 1D: yeah..  
 M: Ok... but...and you didn't have trouble with the instructions?  
 (Mix): No...  
 M: Ok... let's go on to the next one. Questions 6 to 10. That's a yes-no – not/given set of questions. And these are fairly literal as well... and they are yes/no/ and not-given. How do you feel about those?  
 (silence)  
 3D: The que... uh..the questions have the same idea.... So...  
 M: As what? As in the reading? ... or what do you mean?  
 3D: Umm... they talk about the one topic part in the reading so I should figure out if it's true or..  
 M: Yes... Did you find that an easy task or uh... how difficult..?  
 3D: little confused...  
 M: Confusing?  
 1D: For me, it is – yes or no question – is the most difficult part..  
 3D: Yeah...  
 M: Really? Out of all of the different types of questions – yes/no you find difficult? Why?  
 1D: Because it is confused... I don't know why...  
 4D: Because of the...  
 1D: Usually between no and not given..  
 M: Sorry... because of the what?  
 4D: Not given state...  
 M: Ah... the not given... is that the part that confuses you?  
 1D: Yeah  
 5D: We can find the yes or no...  
 M: Ok... but the not given is challenging  
 1D: No or not given...  
 M: (unclear)... and you agree with that, yeah? No?  
 2D: Yes.  
 M: Ok. How do you think you did on 6 to 10? Ok or not?  
 4D: So – so  
 1D: Not sure

- M: Huh? Not sure? (laughter)... Ok..good, let's move on to questions 11 to 13. These are multiple choice and again... I have labeled them literal which means they are fairly direct – you can find the answers in the text without doing too much rethinking.
- 1D: Yeah. Easy.
- M: Ummm.. I am not sure if you agree but that's what I have labeled them as. Let me have your opinions on those.
- 1D: This one was easy..
- 3D: Easy
- (Mix): The easiest one..
- M: The easiest one? What's the easiest part? Is it the format?
- 4D: No, the multiple choice.
- M: The multiple choice?
- 1D: Yeah.
- M: So you find that easier... why do you think that's easier?
- 1D: Because I didn't find it hard to find the answers
- M: No? Easy. Is it ...are you familiar with this question type more than ..
- 1D: Yeah..
- M: ..... yes, no, not given?
- 1D/3D/4D: Yes – yeah- yuh
- M: Why is that? How come you have had more exposure to that one?
- 1D: In high school mainly our...uh... English reading exams was ...the question was... all multiple...multiple choice
- M: Ah, I see... in high school they had a lot of multiple choice?
- 1D: Yes
- 3D: Yeah
- M: So you have a lot of experience with that?
- 1D: Yes
- M: Ok.. so you think you did alright on those, yeah?
- 1D: Yeah.
- M: Let's look at topic number two – Votes for Women. What was that about, do you remember?
- 1D: Yeah.... About how the woman in London started to ...ah... has a.. has a chance .... Ah... vote
- 3D: (unclear)
- 1D: Vote..
- M: Right. That's how ..the women ...in London got their vote..., right? What they did. Very good. Umm... Let's talk about the topic first. How do you feel about this topic? A) It's historical B) it's about women and C) It's in another country ... (chuckle).... How do you feel about this? Do you like this topic? Or did you.... I don't know.... Anything about it..
- 1D: umm... when I read a lot of sentence and paragraph , I found it easy to understand the idea..

- M: Ok... the idea was easy? And the topic itself is something you are familiar with?
- 3D/1D: No... no
- 3D: But we heard about it...
- M: You heard about it? But you are not familiar with it?
- 1D: No
- M: Ok...so... umm the reason you are not familiar is...is what? Because you don't vote in your country? Or you do vote... I mean... I don't know
- 3D: Yeah...
- M: Do you vote personally, each of you?
- 1D: No
- 3D: No but if we want to we can...
- M: You can vote if you want?
- 3D: Yeah..
- M: Ok... so it's not a foreign concept – voting.
- 1D: hmmm
- M: It is? Ok... (5D).. do you agree with that?
- 5D: Yes.
- M: It's not an idea that you have never seen before ... ummm... what are your opinions about it?
- (silence)
- M: You have a lot of background on this?
- 5D: Not much...
- (silence)
- M: Not much...Ok.. (chuckle)... Let's look at the questions, ok? Ok... ok... so you're not... you're ok with the topic but it's not that familiar, is that what you're saying? ...Ok. It's not really, really way out... ok... 14 and 15 are multiple choice. And you were saying earlier you found those easy?
- 4D: Yes...
- M: What about this one? Because the second reading is a little bit more difficult than the first. You still found the multiple choice easier?
- 1D: Not easier...like the first one
- M: (laugh) Not as easy as the first one? (laughter all around)  
So, maybe it depends on the difficulty of the... of the reading. 16 is also a multiple choice. How did you find that one?
- 3D: It's easy.
- M: What's easier about that one?
- 3D: Hmmm... the years
- M: The years? Yeah? So the other ones have words and the numbers.. you've got numbers here to deal with. You find that easier... ok. 17 to 19 is a fill in the blank and you have to choose things from the passage that fit... Pretty much literal... meaning it's fairly direct. How did you feel?  
(silence) How about you? (2D) 17 to 19... fill in the blank.
- 2D: It was easy... and I found the answers directly.

- M: Ok.. you didn't have problems. Any problems? Ladies... did you have problems with this one
- (unclear)
- 1D: I found the answer but it took a bit of time.
- M: It took a bit of time? What about you? (2D) Shrug? (laughter)  
Gentlemen... what do you think?
- 5D: The first time... we were lost
- M: The first time you were lost?
- 1D: Yeah...
- M: You didn't know how to answer this question or you were...
- 1D: Where to find the answers
- M: Where to find the answers?
- 4D: I agree with that .. I took a long time.
- M: It took a long time? So, it's more challenging... because of the format?
- (unclear)
- Alright, here we go again with the yes/no/not-given. Right? There are lots here this time. First of all, I would like to ask you how you feel that there are two readings that have yes/no/not-given. How do you feel about that?
- 1D: The first one I tried to answer, but once I saw this question again, I didn't ...I just put yes, yes, yes, yes.
- M: You didn't want to attempt it?
- 1D: Yes.. because I hate this part ... of the test.
- M: You hate this part? So you just put yes, no...
- 1D: So I just put yes, yes, yes...whatever...
- (laughter)
- M: Anyone else do that for this one? Or did you attempt to do it?
- 2D: I think you would lose mark in this question...
- M: Really? Especially if you're guessing yes, no, and not-given...if you are just guessing...(laughter) Alright. Well, what about the last one, question 27. It is not a multiple choice but it is evaluative ... it is more of a thinking question, where you have to use your judgement. What do you think?
- 3D: It can be.. it can be more than... than one...than one... answer.
- M: You think it could be more than one answer?
- 3D: That what I know. Because ...when it be more than one answer, (unclear)... I have more chance to get one of them right...
- M: Right... but there is only one answer that they want...A, B, C, or D for this one. They don't want more than one. What you're saying is ... you think more than one answer is correct?
- 3D: Yeah
- M: But you know that's not true... (laughter)... Gentlemen, what do you think of that one?
- 5D: It was a lot of thinking..

- M: A lot of thinking? (mumbling amongst participants)  
 Alright... (unclear)... so the last one... the topic is measuring organizational performance. When you first read the topic, did you understand what the reading was about? Before you read it, and you just read the topic...like the title...did you understand what the reading was about?
- 1D: I... eh... my mind, it work some ideas but I didn't ...ummm... get the right one.
- M: Ok. So you had some ideas but as you started reading... it was different
- 1D: Ah...it become clear.
- M: Yeah? Ok. Gentlemen, how about you with that title- measuring organizational performance?
- 5D: Nothing...
- M: Nothing?
- 5D: Yeah.
- M: What does that mean? (chuckle) You had no idea or you... (unclear)... (laugh)
- M: You should read the passage first? Ok. So the title is not helping you much.
- 5D: No.
- M: Ok. Now, after you read it, did you understand the title?  
 (unclear mumbling)
- M: Yes? So, the topic is ...what?
- 1D: hmmm
- M: What's it about?
- 5D: About an experiment
- M: An experiment, good.
- 5D: For employees
- M: For employees, right. So it's business related or...?
- 5D: hmmm
- M: Would the topic be business related or would the topic be related to something else?
- 3D: Business... related
- M: Business in general? It talks about productivity and attitudes..
- 3D: Yeah
- M: Right?
- 3D: Yeah
- 1D: Aha
- M: The hierarchy...
- 3D: But it's too long...
- M: It's too long?
- 1D: And there are... there are charts.. at the end of the passage.
- M: There are charts.. yes. How did you feel about that? That's a little bit different.

1D: It freaked me out  
 3D: Yeah...  
 M: Sorry?  
 1D: Its freaked me out  
 M: It freaked you out? (laugh) Why?  
 1D: I don't know. It's the first time for me  
 3D: Yeah..  
 1D: ... to see..  
 M: Charts... (laugh)  
 1D: ... a chart there... (laugh)... I thought I reached the reading... and I  
 M: The writing? Yes. They always have it in the writing. Gentlemen... how do you feel about the charts appearing at the end of the passage?  
 5D: (unclear)  
 M: You think the charts helped you?  
 5D: Yes.  
 M: What about you, sir?  
 4D: I didn't use it.  
 M: Did you not finish it or you just ignored the charts?  
 4D: Ignored the charts...  
 M: You ignored the charts. Anyone else ignore the charts? What did you do? (2D) Did you get to it?  
 2D: No, it helped me when I skimmed the passage, to know about the...eh... passage and give me information.  
 M: So, it helped you a little bit...to understand?  
 2D: Yeah..  
 M: Ok. Alright... let's look at the questions, quickly. 28 to 30 again multiple choice. Those are your favourites, you said. Now this is the most difficult passage, do you still think those are your favourites?  
 4D: Yes  
 1D: No  
 M: Yeah? No? (unclear) You have changed your mind?(laughter)  
 1D: I changed my mind...  
 M: Ok... and the last one is 31.. no not last one... but 31 to 36 is fill in the blanks..  
 (mumbling)  
 M: Sorry?  
 3D: It was easy.  
 M: That was easy?  
 3D: Yeah.  
 M: The fill in the blanks?  
 2D: I missed two.  
 M: You missed two? Why?  
 2D: Because of the time

- M: Because of the time, yeah? You needed more time? Gentlemen, how did you do with fill in the blanks?
- 4D: I missed a lot of them.
- M: You missed a lot of them? And what is your reason for missing them?
- 4D: The timing and the long passage.
- M: The timing and the length of the passage? Alright... what else do we have here... the last ones 37 to 40. Oh... the matching...there you go... a matching exercise. Sooo, you've got A to I to match to 4 figures, yes?
- 1D: hmm
- M: So those are the charts?
- 1D: Yes.
- M: Ok. What do you think?
- 1D: Because of the charts, it was easy... easier... but not very easy.
- M: It was easy but not very easy? (laughter) It was medium, is that what you are saying?
- 1D: Ok.
- M: Did you... did you finish this part?
- 1D: Yeah.
- M: You did?
- 3D: In two minutes.
- M: Sorry?
- 3D: In two minutes
- M: In two minutes you finished it?
- 3D: Yeah
- M: So you.. you rushed? Is that what you are saying?
- 3D: I am not sure about the ...
- M: How do you feel about having so many choices for 4 figures?
- (silence)
- M: Does that help you? When you have all of these different choices? Does that help you?
- 1D: It's confusing when you are trying to answer it but it help us because it increase the chance of getting the right answers.
- M: If you have more choices, you have more... a bigger chance of getting the right answer... really?
- 1D: Yeah...
- M: What do you think? (to the others) --- Never heard that but that's ...that's fine, yeah.
- 5D: They want to..
- M: Sorry?
- 5D: ...confuse us.
- M: You think they want to confuse you? That's why they give you... they don't want to help you.. so opposite opinions here. What do you think (to 2D) when you have so many choices, does that help you? One person says it helps, one person says it doesn't..

- 2D: No, because we only have 4 figures and maybe more than 7 choices.  
M: So... you think that that is ..  
2D: Confusing.  
M: Confusing. Overall, how did you feel about this test? Did you like it? It was fair? Topics? Anything?  
1D: I never took a reading exam... that I like it. I always hate it.  
M: You have never taken one you liked?  
1D: Yeah  
M: You have always hated them?  
1D: Yeah  
M: Lovely... ok... (laughter). Anyone else?  
4D: All of us.  
M: All of us? Ok. So.. nobody likes the reading section?  
1D: No.  
M: Ok. Just quickly sum up why you don't like the reading section of the exam.  
1D: Because with some question, I just lose the hope.  
M: You lose hope with some questions?  
1D: And there are lots of words and passage and I ... it is really boring.  
M: It's boring?  
3D: I think the time...  
M: You think the time.. not the topics?  
3D: We can understand the passage if we have ..eh... more time.  
M: Right. So time pressure ..  
2D: Time and complicated.  
M: What's complicated?  
2D: The passages  
M: What about the passages is complicated?  
2D: Sometime the topics... is a new...sometime we get a topic..eh... that we are not familiar with..  
M: Right...  
2D: So we shocked...  
M: You are shocked when you have a topic you are not familiar with.  
And..what about the vocabulary level? Do you find it's ok or do you find that challenging as well?  
2D: hmm... after I enter the university, it's become ok.  
M: So now that you are studying here at university, you find it ...  
2D: Ok.  
M: Ok. Gentlemen, what about you? Final comments.  
4D: I ... we need more time and the passage should be in our field.. not outside.  
M: In your field? Meaning?  
4D: Like... not medical or something complicated that we don't know...  
M: Ok. So something that you have some background in?

- 3D: Yeah.
- M: Is that what your saying?
- 1D: Yes. And some passages have...eh... scientific concepts
- M: Right...
- 1D: ...which we cannot understand.
- M: Right. So, you don't understand because....why? You haven't studied that or?
- 1D: We studied that but in Arabic not in English.
- M: Ah..ok... not in English. Alright...well.. thank you very much for making time for this study here. I appreciate your help.

**Group E Transcription**

- M: Book 4, test 3, group E. Welcome. Let's have a look at our readings. Overall, there were 3 readings. How did you feel about them?
- 1E: The first one.. it was easy. I can understand and read it. It was easy and I can answer the question without going back to the reading.
- M: Ok.
- 1E: But the last one, I feel difficulty to read it and understand it.
- M: The third one?
- 1E: Yeah. Each time, I confused. Go back, read and don't understand the idea so..
- 3E: I think it's because .. uh... it's hard to focus on something ... after a while, you suddenly think about something else... very hard for our brain.
- M: Are you talking about the third passage?
- 3E: No...
- M: Or for every passage?
- 3E: No..for all
- M: All passages?
- 3E: You focus on something...some task... and then you will change to other things – it's hard for our brain. That's why if when we flip to...uh.. other ..uh..other... other task
- M: Yeah
- 3E: Feel like hard
- M: So.. the changing of the tasks is difficult or the topic changes?
- 3E: The...the topics
- M: The topics?
- 3E: Yeah.
- M: Ok. So you find that confusing.
- 4E: I agree them.
- M: With both of them?
- 4E: Yeah.
- M: (laughter) Your third one is the hardest and..
- 4E: Changing the topics
- M: Changing the topics?
- 4E: Yes.
- M: Ok. Let's look at the first topic – Microenterprise Credit for Street Youth. Before you started reading this, did you understand this topic? The title is: Microenterprise Credit for Street Youth.
- 4E: Before I, I (unclear)
- M: Ok.. so you didn't know street youth, you didn't know microenterprise credit, no?
- Mix: No... no
- M: 4E?
- 4E: No. After I ..I... after I read the article I understand the idea.
- M: But not...

- 4E: Not before... yeah.
- 1E: I understand only about credit, children, street...
- M: Right..
- 1E: something like that..
- M: So... at the end... you understood the topic?
- Mix: Yeah...yeah....
- M: Is it something that you're familiar with? Street youth?
- 3E: No... because we don't have that kind of program here. But we already understand about the program.
- M: You don't ...have this program here but your..
- 3E: ... but we understand it..
- M: ..you understand it but you don't have it?
- 3E: Yeah.
- 1E: He means that we don't have in the UAE something like that but we are suitable to read this and understand it.
- M: Right.
- 1E: Different cultures, different countries. It is easy to understand.
- M: Easy to understand? Ok. So the topic was ok?
- Mix: Yeah... yes.
- M: Alright. Why don't we look at the questions. Questions 1 to 4 were multiple choice questions and they were both literal and rethinking questions. So it was a mix. How did you find those multiple choice questions?
- 3E: Some of them...easy...
- 4E: Yeah.
- M: But not all?
- 3E: Uh.. because each time you have to think and understand the topic, then answer. Not like other ...other questions, you should find it in the referencing.
- M: Oh... you are talking about scanning questions?
- 3E: Yeah.
- M: Literal? Try to find an answer quickly? You are saying that's not this?
- 3E: Yeah. Uhh... this one you should... I understand it and then ...uh... answer.
- M: Ok.
- 3E: That's why it's (unclear) difficult.
- M: So... how about you (to another student)? Did you think it was easy or difficult?
- 1E: Some is easy some is difficult...like question 1... you need to...uh.. read the article and then... understand it, and then put it in your mind to answer the question.
- M: Ok.
- 1E: You cannot find the answer directly.
- M: Right.. you cannot.

- 1E: You need some thinking to do it.
- M: Ok...
- 4E: Uh... I think the most problem is the ...that take time ..when we...uh... find the main purpose. Uh... we must read the most paragraph but that take time...and uh...some question like that need some synonyms of vocabulary.
- M: Oh...they are using synonyms...
- 4E: Yeah.
- M: And how do you find that?
- 4E: Uh... a little hard.
- M: A little hard when they use the synonyms?
- 4E: Yeah, a little hard when they use the synonyms... yes.
- M: Alright... are you comfortable with multiple choice as a test task type or question type? Are you familiar with multiple choice questions?
- Mix: Yes...yes.
- 1E: It's limited our answers.
- M: It limits your answers, yes.
- 1E: You can eliminate some questions, keep some and we can solve one question.
- M: What about questions 5 to 8? Those are literal, fill in the blanks. Meaning they're fairly direct. But you have to fill in a chart or table. How did you feel about this?
- 1E: This chart...it's uh... properly made, we can float ...uh... in the paragraphs, we can find the answer directly. Step by step.... by reading the paragraph... uh answers will come up. It's easy.
- Mix: Yeah. ... ya...
- M: This one was easy?
- Mix: Yeah...yeah... it's easy.
- M: Because... you are saying it's direct...it's literal?
- Mix: Yeah... yes.
- M: What about this format? Of having a table to fill out. How do you feel about that?
- 3E: It's better.. because we can know...which...which.. where we should find the answers in.
- 4E: hmmm
- M: Ok.
- 1E: It's give us some hints.
- M: Yes, it does. Yes. Ok. It gives you hints because it gives you examples of what was done for the first section. Ok. So...no problems there... you liked those. Alright. Let's move on to the yes, no, not-given.
- 1E: It's for..
- M: Yes, no, not-given... yes... umm... a couple of those were actually inference questions as well...so not direct. A little bit... a little bit more than rethinking. How did you feel about those?

- 1E: No and not given is tricky.  
M: Sorry?  
1E: No and not given is tricky.  
M: Oh... (unclear)... it's tricky?  
1E: Yeah.  
M: No, not given?  
1E: Yeah  
4E: Yeah  
M: You both agree?  
4E: Because...uh... sometimes you think it is not given and the answer is confusing between not given and no. Don't know what to put... if you put one of them and the other is right, you..uh.. will lose marks.  
M: You will lose marks, yeah? So you are not sure sometimes..  
4E: Yeah  
M: ...whether the answer is no or ...  
4E: not given.  
M: Ok. Umm...if it were just yes, no would it be easier?  
3E: I think yes.  
1E: Yes.  
4E: It's too confusing..  
M: How do you think you did on this?  
3E: Great.  
M: Great? (laughter)  
3E: But..uh...as I think... maybe it's wrong.  
M: Ok. Well, I'll have a look at it and see. (to 4E) How do you think you did on the yes, no, not-given?  
4E: Uh.... Ok...  
M: Ok?  
4E: Yeah.  
M: Yeah?  
1E: I did ok.  
M: You did ok? Question 13 is another multiple choice- which we've talked about. So... let's move on to the next reading passage – where you have a different type of exercise. It's called a rethinking –matching exercise. You have to think and match. Ok? So, there is a list of headings that you have and you have to match them to the sections in the reading. Tell me about this.  
3E: I sometime had difficulty to find answers because..uh... some of ... maybe 2 paragraphs have...have same meaning... same purpose but a little different.  
M: A little different... so it's similar.  
3E: Similar but a little different so it's difficult to fin... to find the answers  
M: Ok.  
3E: To choose which one...

- M: So, which heading is for which paragraph...
- 3E: Yeah
- M: ... you find harder
- 1E: Sometimes the ... uh... paragraph is too long so you can't find the main heading to it. So maybe it's suitable to two or more headings..it's uh...
- M: How many headings do we have? One...two...five...six
- 1E: Two headings you can put it in the same paragraph..
- M: Yes...
- 1E: So we confused...one word can change everything.
- M: Right... You feel the same way?
- 4E: Yes.
- M: What is so confusing about this?
- 4E: Uh.. confusing... you mean? Uh... this...uh.. the article ...sometimes the paragraph is too long... and ..uh..
- M: Ok...so the same point...it's too long.
- 4E: And the topics which...writing...written here...is ...uh... sometimes gives some specific things in the paragraph.
- M: Right..
- 4E: Sometimes we have difficulties to find it.
- M: So, the headings have some specific items
- 4E: Yeah
- M: ... you have difficulty finding
- 4E: Yeah
- M: How do you think you did on matching the headlines?
- 1E: Not...not that good.
- Mix: No...
- M: None...of you? (laughter).. (unclear)... let's see how you did. Let's look at questions 18 to 21. These are short answer questions. They are Wh-questions. What do you think?
- (silence)
- M: You don't know? They are literal – at least that is how I have identified them- meaning you can find the answers directly.
- 1E: Yeah... you can find the answer directly.
- M: Do you agree with that?
- 3E: Yes. Yes.
- 1E: If you know the phrases and synonyms, you can find it easily.
- M: So... they are using synonyms again..
- 1E: Yeah... use synonyms...if you understand the question, you will find it... the paragraph.
- M: Oh. Ok. So as long as we know the...understand the question and know some of the synonyms, you are fine.
- Mix: Yes... fine.
- M: Questions 22 to 26 are rethinking questions as a summary question ..where you fill in the blanks. What do you think?

- 3E: Here, I think...uh... it's the hardest one.
- M: The hardest one?
- 3E: Yeah...
- M: Fill in the blanks- the summary, yes?
- 3E: Yeah.. because a summary about all the paragraph and..uh.. it's take...uhh.. information from here and there cause you should read all the passage.. so to... try
- M: Right.
- 3E: ...to write...
- M: So you are saying because the whole passage is involved in this question, it is difficult?
- 3E: Yeah.
- 4E: Yes.
- 1E: That's right. Sometimes it need you to understand the paragraph very well ... because it need.. the answer only one word..
- M: One word
- 1E: One or two words so you need to focus and find this word ..maybe you will find the next or the previous word , it would be wrong. You know where it's at but you can't know which word is the correct one
- M: Alright... so you know where it is but not which word. Sometimes you have a box at the bottom, filled with words... does that help you? Is that a better exercise than this?
- Mix: Yes...yes..yeah
- M: Because... you know what I'm referring to? Sometimes ..
- Mix: Yeah...yeah..
- M: ... there is a box of some choices
- Mix: Aha... aha...
- M: ...and you find that easier?
- 3E: Of course it's easier because if you are confused between 4 or 3 words, you find it here --- ok this one... ok I will write it. Thanks.
- M: Let's talk about the topic before moving on to reading 3. What was this passage about? This reading..
- 1E: Volcanoes
- 4E: Yeah
- M: Volcanoes?
- Mix: Yeah..volcanoes.
- M: What about volcanoes?
- 1E: Uh.... it talks about volcanoes ...uh.. the types of it.
- M: Ahem... the types of volcanoes?
- 1E: Yeah. And the...uh... the lava... the magma... the magma which is the magma... and where we can found volcanoes ..
- M: Ok
- 1E: And they.. puts in the paragraph some examples...of volcanoes that the earth... they mention some numbers, years...

- M: How familiar are you with this topic?  
 3E: Good because I read .. read about volcano before...that's why..  
 M: So you've been exposed to the topic before...  
 3E: Yeah  
 M: How? In .. in high school or in..?  
 3E: Yeah..yeah... in high school  
 M: In high school?  
 3E: Yes  
 M: You too?  
 4E: Yes.  
 1E: Yeah... because volcanos is a general topic that's...uh..uh.. all the.. all the peoples are talking about. We see it in news and newspaper, tvs and programs so we have a small background on this topic. So we are used to read this article...  
 M: Right...so.. even though you don't have volcanoes here,  
 1E: But we have some  
 M: ... you have some background  
 1E: We have some background.  
 M: Ok... alright. Let's take a look at the last reading then – Obtaining Linguistic Data. What do you think of that title? Did you know what it meant?  
 Mix: Ah no...no..  
 M: No? (laughter)  
 1E: Nothing.  
 M: Nothing? (laughter)... 4E?  
 4E: Also me I didn't understand ... because..uh... I didn't have the time... uh.. much time to understand the paragraph.  
 M: Right...did you finish..uh... the third reading?  
 1E: No  
 M: No?  
 4E: I didn't  
 M: No... (unclear)... so no one finished it. Umm.. Obtaining Linguistic Data is the title. And this is what the reading is generally about, is it not?  
 1E: Yes.  
 M: Did you read a little bit of it?  
 1E: Yeah.  
 M: So... what is it about?  
 3E: I don't know...  
 M: You don't know? (to 4E)... no idea?  
 1E: It's about taking information by speaking or recording ..  
 M: Right...  
 1E: ..informal... something like that...

- M: Right...it does talk about that...you are right. Let's look at our question format then 27 to 31 – those are matching questions... and they are rethinking questions at the same time. Yeah? Uhh... which paragraph gives the following information? So you have to match information to the paragraphs. How did you find that?
- 4E: Think that is similar to the question with the... uhh..
- M: The headings?
- 4E: Question 2...yes...
- M: So you think it's similar to the headings...
- 4E: Yes
- M: Well, it is a matching exercise .. yeah...
- 1E: They cover some information in the paragraph – specific information in the paragraph – that we ... if we understand that , we can match it easily.
- M: So... you found it easy?
- 1E: It's not easy...it's about trick because this whole paragraph is about 10 or 20 lines. They took only 1 sentence and put it here so you need to read it all and understand.
- M: Ok.
- 4E: This will take... uh.. time also.
- M: It will also take time? This matching...yes? 32 to 36 is fill in the blanks again- with regards to a table – which you said you liked before - uhh... did you get this far?
- Mix: No...because... just no time..
- M: You didn't have time.
- 3E: And my brain is blocked...
- M: So.. and then the last questions you didn't get to ..now let me see what the last questions are.. They are also a summary... a fill in the blank... Ok... we talked about that format already. The topic about linguistics and linguistic data --- any background on that? Do you have any knowledge of this topic?
- 1E: It's my first time that I heard about it.
- M: Your first time?
- 4E: Also... me too...
- M: And...and why do you think you have no knowledge about this topic?
- 4E: Ah... maybe I don't have experience about (unclear)
- M: No experience?
- 4E: Yeah... like not talked about previous in high school or something or even in my life...
- M: Or even in your life?
- 1E: Didn't face..uh... a situation like this...
- M: Right... so it's not a very common topic
- (unclear): Yeah...not a very common topic.
- M: Is there anything else you'd like to say about the questions or the topics ... about the reading part of the exam? Before we finish..

- 1E: (unclear)... three paragraphs in the exam is too much... usually we are...uh... reading... focus on the first one and second one... when we reach the third one, we are ... our mind go blank... so we can't do anything.
- M: Why does it go blank?
- 1E: All mind...
- M: But why?
- 1E: I feel like I don't understand... I feel like my mind is..
- M: Are you tired?
- 1E: Yes... tired... tired from reading.
- M: Tired from reading?
- 1E: Thinking about it... yeah
- M: And thinking about it? (laughter)
- 1E: It's mostly not matching.... There are some parts thinking and...
- M: Right..
- 1E: It's need more effort...
- M: Ok.. when you ...
- 4E: (unclear)
- M: Sorry?
- 4E: And that's will affect for the ...uh...other .. part of the exam ..the IELTS...for the writing... uh.. because when we are tired of concentrating on the reading...
- M: Right.
- 4E: We will tired to... (unclear)
- M: You'll be tired when you do the writing?
- 4E: Yeah.
- M: Which comes after the reading...
- 4E: Yes.
- M: Yes. It gets worse ... (laughter) before it gets better. Ok..umm.. that's fine, I guess. Is there nothing else you want to say about the topics? No? When the topic is familiar to you, you find it easier to do the exercise?
- Mix: Yes..yeah..
- 3E: Because we have a knowledge about it. Even if we don't have (unclear) to read it, we are ready now..
- 1E: Yeah... we can just skim, scan.. find the answers and we have some knowledge about it. We can read and answer... but if we don't have anything about the topic, because.. like... what is this?.. first time I heard about I read it, I want to understand it. There is no time to do that.
- M: Well... thank you very much for your help...

## Appendix E

### Content Analysis Raw Data

**Guiding Question:** Is \_\_\_\_\_ (concept/product/belief) more/less part of my shared cultural knowledge than another cultural group's?'

#### Book 2, Test 1

CO	typhoon	PH	protest
CO	monsoon	CO	a marble
PE	breakneck		

#### Book 2, Test 2

CO	poisonous mushroom	PH	decision making forced down
PH	1970s America	PH	1960s Britain
SR	multi-skilled workforce management	SR	particular organizational structure of

#### Book 2, Test 3

CO	horse-drawn carriage	PH	a right
CO	a ring road	PH	a democratic community
CO	a tolled highway	PH	Europe 1965
CO	an athletic complex	PH	Europe 1993
CO	a housing estate	PH	1974 America
CO	an entertainment park	PE	to mushroom
SR	welfare	PE	to go through the roof
BS	absence from work = problem	SR	staff determines own work schedule

**Book 2, Test 4**

CO	a green consumer	PH	1990-1994 Britain
CO	a reading primer	PH	1986 America
CO	the Holy Grail	PH	1989 Canada and America
CO	the Apollo Program	PE	Gone off the boil
CO	Frankenstein	PE	Armchair green
SR	social record of business	PE	Can't see the woods for the trees
SR	ethical spender	PE	See through a darker glass
SR	standard of literacy	SR	teacher's main concern =
SR	teacher's main task =	BS	animal testing is a big issue
BS	atom overshadowing lives of people		

**Book 3, Test 1**

CO	fire arrows	PH	pigeon of Archytas 360 BC
CO	basket of fire	PH	13 <sup>th</sup> century China
CO	arrow as flying saber	PH	18 <sup>th</sup> century British-Indian conflict
CO	bamboo shaft	PH	19 <sup>th</sup> century Mexican conflict
CO	egg which moves and burns	PH	1992 US
PE	blind alley		

**Book 3, Test 2**

CO	dung beetle	PH	1960's Australia
CO	scrub	PH	1982 US
CO	woodland	PH	1960 – 1985 Denmark
CO	bush fly	PH	1984 New Zealand
CO	buffalo fly	PH	former communist countries
CO	stripes on arm	PH	democratic society
CO	pips on shoulder	SR	woman executive
SR	role of government in environment		

**Book 3, Test 3**

CO	coracles	PH	1946 Britain
CO	reed boat	PH	1945 Asia and Africa
CO	kayak	PH	1942 USA
CO	camel trappings	PH	1992 Rio de Janeiro
CO	thatched hut	BS	tribe seen as handicapped
CO	manioc	CO	Mistral
CO	Foehn	CO	siesta
CO	stag		

**Book 3, Test 4**

CO	car pooling	PH	a (political) campaign
CO	war chest	PH	to face opposition
CO	ice rink	PH	1991 London
PE	chalk up the pavement	PH	1906 – 1914 London
		PH	Women's Political Union
		PH	a march
		PH	a fight for freedom and equality

**Book 4, Test 1**

CO	tropical rainforest	PH	history of illustration 1877
CO	1000 football fields	SR	40 min = normal class time
CO	acid rain	BS	sympathy to animals
CO	flooded plains	BS	older children value conflicting views
CO	S. American boutu	CO	Chinese beiji
CO	Indian susus		

**Book 4, Test 2**

CO	Navajo nation	CO	preservation of fruits in jar
PH	Australia 1994	CO	Qi energy
PH	America 1990	PE	peppered with
PE	hand in glove	PE	bedside manner
PE	developmental hiccup	SR	doctors = powerful
SR	high standing of professionals	SR	cold, impersonal doctors
BS	playing makes you intelligent		

**Book 4, Test 3**

CO	street kids	PH	Mt. Pinatubo 1991
CO	Red Cross	PH	Mexico, 10 years ago
CO	YWCA	PH	1883 Sunda Straits
CO	ice caps	PH	1902 Martinique
CO	volcanoes	PH	1815 Indonesia
CO	The Great Whinn Sill	BS	people alive because of volcanoes
CO	Hadrian's Wall	CO	the Karoo
CO	Giant's Causeway		

**Book 4, Test 4**

CO	Michael Johnson	PH	1968 Mexico City
CO	Inuit	PH	western Asia 3000 years ago
CO	snows of Alaska	PH	1950's and 60's in the West
CO	Agatha Christie	PH	1939-1945 World War
CO	Stephen Spielberg	PH	a liberal society
PE	doomsday scenario	BS	to have basic right to healthcare
SR	female athlete		

**Book 6, Test 1**

CO	Australian Sports	PH	1996 Atlanta Olympics
CO	snowmobiles	PH	20 <sup>th</sup> century Europe
CO	igloos	PH	1970s America
CO	Thule people	PH	1985/86 North America
CO	kayaks	PE	canary in the mine
CO	sled	SR	state benefits
CO	Inuit Q		
CO	Inuit		

**Book 6, Test 2**

CO	indigenous of Tasmania	PH	political lobbies
CO	indigenous of South Africa	PH	democratic process
CO	Gothic word = tachund	PH	pressure groups
CO	Tsimshian language	PH	referendum
CO	canoe	PH	America 1994
CO	World Bank	PH	7th century Europe
BS	the self-reliance of elderly people		

**Book 6, Test 3**

CO	Lumiere Bros	PH	Paris 1895
CO	cowboy	PH	Italy 1912
CO	fairground attraction	BS	magic
CO	fruit fly	BS	film is most effective art form
CO	hamster	CO	rhesus monkey
CO	squirrel monkey		

**Book 6, Test 4**

CO	New York musical	PH	intervention campaign
CO	World Bank	PH	1979 Nicaragua
PH	UK 1992	PH	Ireland 1993
SR	National Literacy Crusade	SR	Pupils, parents, staff all make policies
BS	selling pharma requires ethical judgement		

**Book 7, Test 1**

CO	bats	PH	at height of Roman Empire
CO	fireflies	PH	the industrial revolution
CO	reservoirs	PH	1965 Japan
CO	faith healing	PH	1980 US
CO	aqueducts	PE	pinprick
CO	classical musicians	PE	phantom limb
CO	baroque musicians	SR	government ensures some for all
CO	Silva mind control	BS	mammalian are ancestors of ours
CO	faith healing		

**Book 7, Test 2**

CO	typhoon	CO	sea loch
CO	wooden pagoda	CO	donkey for transport
CO	Toji Temple	CO	wheelbarrow
CO	Buddhism	PH	1995 Hanshin earthquake
CO	tall pine tree	PH	1968 Japan
CO	shinbashira	PH	826 Japan
CO	tightrope walker	PH	6th century China
CO	skylark	PH	taxes
CO	lapwing	PH	1985 Tanzania
CO	corn bunting	SR	gov. role essential to sustainable farming
CO	hedgerow	SR	communities participate in road construction

**Book 7, Test 3**

CO	Inuit	PH	France 20,000 years ago
CO	Aleut	PH	20 year period in N. America
CO	Navajo	PH	N. Asia migration 14,000 years ago
CO	Apache	PH	1990 Strasbourg
CO	Pima-Papago	PE	jingle
CO	Maya	PE	green lung
CO	Ticuna	BS	ants are like humans
CO	Na-Denes		
CO	Amerind		
BS	N.E. Asia is believed to be origin of New World people		

**Book 7, Test 4**

CO	sledges	PH	1999 Alaska
CO	hieroglyph	PH	1980 Los Angeles
CO	pyramid at Saqqara	PE	hanging in the air
CO	adobe roofs	BS	preferring peace and quiet
PH	Egypt 3000 years ago		
PH	1250 BC China		
PH	200 years ago Aleutian Islands		
PH	1940- 1959 Alaska		

**Appendix F**  
**Geographical Analysis Raw Data**

<b>Place</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>Region</b>
Pearl River	China	Asia
Chek Lap Kok	China	Asia
Osaka Bay	Japan	Asia
Ottawa	Canada	North America
Sydney	Australia	Australia
London	England	Europe
New York	US	North America
Shanghai	China	Asia
Istanbul	Turkey	Europe
Buenos Aires	Argentina	South America
Tokyo	Japan	Asia
Jakarta	Indonesia	Asia
Calcutta	India	Asia
Philadelphia	US	North America
San Francisco	US	North America
Singapore	Singapore	Asia
Charleston	US	North America
Salem	US	North America
Bristol	England	Europe
Plymouth	England	Europe
Surat	India	Asia
Galle	Sri Lanka	Asia
Melaka	Malaysia	Asia
Soochow	China	Asia
Boston	US	North America

Bombay	India	Asia
Madras	India	Asia
Bangkok	Thailand	Asia
Yokohama	Japan	Asia
Brisbane	Australia	Australia
Moscow	Russia	Europe
Mexico City	Mexico	North America
Montreal	Canada	North America
Toronto	Canada	North America
Atlanta	US	North America
Antipodes	New Zealand	Australia
Oxford	England	Europe
Cambridge	England	Europe
France	France	Europe
Spain	Spain	Europe
South Africa	South Africa	Africa
Australia	Australia	Australia
US	US	North America
Europe	Europe	Europe
Africa	Africa	Africa
Denmark	Denmark	Europe
New Zealand	New Zealand	Australia
South East Asia	S.E. Asia	Asia
The Americas	The Americas	South America
The Pacific	The Pacific	Australia
Bolivia	Bolivia	South America
Guatemala	Guatemala	South America
The Andes	The Andes	South America
Indonesia	Indonesia	Asia

West Africa	West Africa	Africa
Arabia	Arabia	Middle East
Papau New Guinea	Papau New Guinea	Australia
The Amazon	The Amazon	South America
Rio De Janeiro	Brazil	South America
Russia	Russia	Europe
Germany	Germany	Europe
Belgium	Belgium	Europe
Los Angeles	US	North America
California	US	North America
Denver	US	North America
Knightsbridge	England	Europe
Brazil	Brazil	South America
South America	South America	South America
Argentina	Argentina	South America
Hawaii	US	North America
Alaska	US	North America
Fairbanks	US	North America
Bath	England	Europe
Chicago	US	North America
New Haven	US	North America
Polynesia	Polynesia	Australia
Idaho	US	North America
Lethbridge	Canada	North America
Durham	England	Europe
Colorado	US	North America
Zambia	Zambia	Africa
Latin America	Latin America	South America
Northern Ireland	Northern Ireland	Europe

Wales	Wales	Europe
Scotland	Scotland	Europe
Sunda Straits	Indonesia	Asia
Martinique	Martinique	Caribbean
Manila	Phillipines	Asia
The Rockies	Canada	North America
Morocco	Morocco	Africa
Indiana	US	North America
Fullerton	US	North America
Melbourne	Australia	Australia
New South Wales	Australia	Australia
Middle East	Middle East	Middle East
Alaska	US	North America
Arctic	Arctic	North America
Nunavut	Canada	North America
Italy	Italy	Europe
Texas	US	North America
Perth	Australia	Australia
Amsterdam	Netherlands	Europe
Copenhagen	Denmark	Europe
Zurich	Switzerland	Europe
Portland	US	North America
Stockholm	Sweden	Europe
North Carolina	US	North America
Irvine	US	North America
Tasmania	Australia	Australia
British Columbia	Canada	North America
Paris	France	Europe
Greece	Greece	Europe

Hollywood	US	North America
New York	US	North America
Washington	US	North America
Nicaragua	Nicaragua	South America
Costa Rica	Costa Rica	South America
Liverpool	England	Europe
Sheffield	England	Europe
Norway	Norway	Europe
Egypt	Egypt	Middle East
Iran	Iran	Middle East
Saqqara	Egypt	Middle East
Aleutian Islands	US	North America
Bering Sea	US	North America
Yukon	US	North America
Maryland	US	North America
Hokkaido	Japan	Asia
Sussex	England	Europe
Siberia	Russia	Europe
Central America	Central America	South America
Yucatan Peninsula	Mexico	North America
Arizona	US	North America
Strasbourg	Germany	Europe
Kobe	Japan	Asia
Kyoto	Japan	Asia
Essex	England	Europe
Tanzania	Tanzania	Africa
Rome	Italy	Europe

## Appendix G

### Question Analysis Raw Data

#### Book 6, Test 1

##### Reading 1: Australia's Sporting Success

###### Matching statement to paragraph

1. RAM
2. RAM
3. RAM
4. RAM
5. RAM
6. RAM
7. RAM

###### Classification

8. LAC
9. LAC
10. LAC
11. LAC

###### Short Answer

12. L-Wh
13. L-Wh

##### Reading 2: Delivering the Goods

###### Matching statement to paragraph

14. RAM
15. RAM
16. RAM
17. RAM

###### T/F/NG

18. L-TF
19. L-TF
20. L-TF
21. L-TF
22. L-TF

###### Summary

23. RAFB
24. RAFB
25. RAFB
26. RAFB

##### Reading 3: Climate Change and the Inuit

###### Matching Main Idea

27. RAM
28. RAM
29. RAM
30. RAM
31. RAM
32. RAM

###### Summary

33. RAFB
34. RAFB
35. RAFB
36. RAFB
37. RAFB
38. RAFB
39. RAFB
40. RAFB

**Book 4, Test 3****Reading 1: Micro-Enterprise Credit for Street Youth****Multiple Choice**

1. L-MC
2. R-MC
3. L-MC
4. R-MC

**Table Completion**

5. LAFB
6. LAFB
7. LAFB
8. LAFB

**Yes/No**

9. I-YN
10. I-YN
11. L-YN
12. L-YN

**Multiple Choice**

13. L-MC

**Reading 2: Volcanoes****Matching main ideas to paragraph**

14. RAM
15. RAM
16. RAM
17. RAM

**Wh-Questions**

18. L-Wh
19. L-Wh
20. L-Wh
21. L-Wh

**Summary**

22. RAFB
23. RAFB
24. RAFB
25. RAFB
26. RAFB

**Reading 3: Obtaining Linguistic Data****Matching Info to Paragraph**

27. RAM
28. RAM
29. RAM
30. RAM
31. RAM

**Table Completion**

32. LAFB
33. LAFB
34. LAFB
35. LAFB
36. RAFB

**Summary**

37. RAFB
38. RAFB
39. RAFB
40. RAFB

**Book 7, Test 2****Reading 1: Why Pagoda's Don't Fall Down****Yes/No**

1. L-YN
2. L-YN
3. L-YN
4. L-YN

**Classification**

5. RAC
6. RAC
7. RAC
8. RAC
9. RAC
10. RAC

**Multiple Choice**

11. L-MC
12. L-MC
13. L-MC

**Reading 2: The True Cost of Food****Matching statement to paragraph**

14. LAM
15. LAM
16. LAM
17. LAM

**Yes/No**

18. L-YN
19. L-YN
20. L-YN
21. L-YN

**Summary**

22. RAFB
23. RAFB
24. RAFB
25. RAFB
26. RAFB

**Reading 3: Makete Integrated Rural Transport****Matching Main Idea**

27. RAM
28. RAM
29. RAM
30. RAM

**Yes/No**

31. R-YN
32. L-YN
33. L-YN
34. R-YN
35. L-YN

**Matching**

36. RAM
37. RAM
38. RAM
39. RAM
40. EAM

**Book 3, Test 2****Reading 1: A Remarkable Beetle****Yes/No**

1. L-YN
2. L-YN
3. L-YN
4. L-YN
5. L-YN

**Label Diagram**

6. RAL
7. RAL
8. RAL

**Complete Chart**

9. LAFB
10. LAFB
11. LAFB
12. LAFB
13. LAFB

**Reading 2: Role of Government in Environmental Management****Matching main ideas**

14. RAM
15. RAM
16. RAM
17. RAM
18. RAM

**Complete Table**

19. LAFB
20. LAFB
21. LAFB
22. LAFB

**Multiple Choice**

23. R-MC
24. L-MC
25. L-MC
26. R-MC
27. R-MC
28. R-MC

**Reading 3: Concept of Role Theory****Yes/No**

29. L-YN
30. L-YN
31. L-YN
32. L-YN
33. R-YN
34. I-YN
35. L-YN

**Short Answer**

36. RAFB
37. RAFB
38. RAFB
39. RAFB

**Multiple Choice**

40. EMC

**Book 3, Test 4****Reading 1: Air Pollution Solutions****Matching**

1. LAM
2. LAM
3. RAM
4. RAM
5. LAM

**Yes/No**

6. LYN
7. LYN
8. LYN
9. LYN
10. LYN

**Multiple Choice**

11. LMC
12. LMC
13. LMC

**Reading 2: Votes for Women****Multiple Choice**

14. LMC
15. RMC
16. LMC

**Fill in blanks**

17. LAFB
18. LAFB
19. LAFB

**Yes/No**

20. RYN
21. LYN
22. RYN
23. LYN
24. LYN
25. LYN
26. LYN

**Multiple**

27. EMC

**Reading 3: Measuring Org. Performance****Multiple Choice**

28. RMC
29. LMC
30. LMC

**Fill in blanks**

31. LAFB
32. LAFB
33. LAFB
34. LAFB
35. LAFB
36. LAFB

**Matching**

37. RAMC
38. RAM
39. RAM
40. RAM
39. RA
40. EA

**Book 7, Test 3**

## Reading 1: Ant Intelligence

**True/False**

1. LTF
2. LTF
3. LTF
4. LTF
5. LTF
6. LTF

**Fill in blanks**

7. RAFB
8. RAFB
9. RAFB
10. RAFB
11. RAFB
12. RAFB
13. RAFB

## Reading 2: Population Movements and Genetics

**Matching**

14. RAM
15. RAM
16. RAM
17. RAM
18. RAM
19. RAM

**Fill in blanks**

20. LAFB
21. LAFB

**Classification**

22. LAC
23. LAC
24. RAC
25. RAC

**Multiple Choice**

26. RMC

## Reading 3: Europe's Forests

**True/False**

27. LTF
28. LTF
29. LTF
30. LTF
31. LTF
32. LTF
33. LTF

**Matching**

34. RAM
35. RAM
36. RAM
37. RAM
38. RAM
39. RAM

**Multiple Choice**

40. RMC